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Back to Myth and Ethical Compromise: García Márquez's Traces on Jeffrey Eugenides's *The Virgin Suicides*

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After locating US writer Jeffrey Eugenides against the background of recent minimalist fiction, this essay evaluates the influence of García Márquez's narratives *Cien años de soledad* and *Crónica de una muerte anunciada* on his first novel, *The Virgin Suicides*. Centered on the novel's magical-realist features, the contrastive analysis contends that *The Virgin Suicides* revives a distinctive modernist mythical impulse. Based on its literary borrowings, this impulse materializes in the endorsement of ancestral beliefs in a female principle and in the ethical demand to put an end to the gradual annihilation of the planet by post-industrial societies.

Key words: magical realism, intertextuality, Jeffrey Eugenides, Gabriel García Márquez, modernist anthropology, postmodernism, feminism, ethical turn.

In a significant number of US narratives written since the end of the seventies, the formal anxieties of radical metafiction seemed to give way to the increasing importance of two different traits; on the one hand, the gradual recognition of minority-concerned realisms and, on the other—especially among white writers—the proliferation of bleak minimalist worldviews and strategies, extending from pioneering Raymond Carver to more recent practitioners of this fictional mode, such as Bobbie Ann Mason or Richard Ford.[1] Minimalism characteristically depicted US white society as the space of the valueless post-human self, devoid of the protective, even if patriarchal, umbrella of humanism. The characters in this type of fiction were frustrated beings, usually lonely divorcees who spent their boring lives going from their work to the shopping mall, from there to the bar for a drink, from the bar to their homes, and then back to work again. Lacking transcendental values, the lives of these characters were described in apparently simple realistic terms in the most highly prized fictional works written in the latter years of the twentieth century. During the eighties and early nineties there was a long-range critical debate about minimalist fiction, including the scope of the term itself. Some critics considered

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minimalism a nihilist world-view inheritor of the valueless society propounded by postmodernism and, as such, very close to blank and dirty-realist fiction, while for others the term represented mostly a set of formal strategies (see Kaufman 1991 and Abády Nagy 2001; compare to Palahniuk 2004: 141–46)

However, at the beginning of the third millennium, prizes and praises have started to go to a younger generation of novelists who seem to be bent on reviving the lost explicit ethical impulse. Such is the case of Jeffrey Eugenides, a Greek-American novelist born in Detroit in 1960. He received an MA in Creative Writing from Stanford in 1986, but, before graduation, he had been working in India with Mother Teresa of Calcutta, a fact that already indicates his concern with ethical issues. He later wrote for the American Academy of Poets in New York, received the Aga Khan Prize for fiction in 1991 for an excerpt of his would-be first novel, *The Virgin Suicides* (1993), and lived an expatriate life in Berlin from 2000 to 2004. In sum, he developed as a creative writer from *academic* premises, while at the same time showing his concern for the problems of contemporary society. According to the author, the story of his first novel developed around "the theme of inexplicable adolescent trauma amid a placid suburban landscape" (*Gale* 2003: 2). However, I would like to argue here that the main themes and motifs of the book are also indebted to García Márquez's novels *Crónica de una muerte anunciada* (1981) and his best-known *Cien años de soledad* (1967).

As I hope to demonstrate, the analysis of these Latin American intertexts will help us clarify three salient aspects of *The Virgin Suicides*. Firstly, the novel's endorsement of a modernist ethos—García Márquez's indebtedness to Anglo-Saxon modernism is a well-known fact, especially to Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha universe (Cohn 1999: 59). Secondly, the steady process of cultural hybridism that US fiction has undergone in the last decades.[2] Finally, the connection existing between the assumptions of a magical reality filtered by modernist anthropology and the ethical turn that the Detroit writer gives to his narrative, a turn in which mythical matriarchal lore plays a remarkable part. By using the phrase "ethical turn," I intend to link Eugenides's creative work to the return to ethics initiated from the grounds of critical theory in the eighties, a turn that, at the time, seemed to be rather conceited, if not totally absent, from minimalist, blank and dirty realist fiction (see Falzon 1998 and Gibson 1999; compare to Eskin 2004). The issue has been related to broader institutional developments, such as "the continuing power of feminist criticism and theory and the rising influence of African American, [postcolonial,] multicultural, and queer criticism and theory, all of which ground themselves in sets of ethicopolitical commitments" (Phelan 2001: 107). As I contend later in the essay, it is a set of feminist eco-critical commitments that brings forth the ethical impulse in *The Virgin Suicides*.

Reviewers of *The Virgin Suicides* almost exclusively mentioned the literary influence of Vladimir Nabokov on the book (Griffith 1994) while, to the question posed by an

2. This process is apparent not only in the well-known cases of writers like Louise Erdrich or Toni Morrison but also in the strong impact that Latin American narrative has on contemporary US fiction (Zamora and Faris 1995). Zamora also offers perceptive insights into the intertextual line that goes from Faulkner to García Márquez and back to US fiction (1989). See Manzanas and Benito for an illuminating analysis of the role of cultural borders in North America (2001: 1–21) that they later extend to a consideration of magical realism as a transnational product characteristic of postcolonial societies (2003: 125–59).

interviewer, the novelist himself only acknowledged having read *Cien años de soledad* in his "late teens and early twenties" (Foer 2002: 77). In the same interview, the Greek-American author was already very conscious of his role in the new US novel. Postmodernism had hit a dead end, he admitted, and although the formal strategies of his second novel *Middlesex*, were certainly *postmodern*—i.e. metafictional—what was new in it, he affirmed, was "the content" (2002: 77). This Pulitzer-winning novel is a long book formally divided into two parts. The first one follows a characteristic mode of historiographic metafiction in its presentation of a Greek family's quest for integration in US society, while the second part imitates the mode of a modernist *Bildungsroman* and features the maturation process of a pseudo-hermaphrodite who happens to be the narrator of the whole book. Certainly, the two most innovative elements of the novel seem to be the strange condition that oppresses the narrator and the theoretical lessons on hermaphrodites that Eugenides teaches his readers in the second part of the book. However, from the perspective of US literary history, the novel's true "innovation" lies in its reinstallation of the mythical impulse that the first generation of historiographic metafiction writers had inherited from modernism (Hutcheon 1988).[3] A similar reinstallation is already present in his first novel. Indeed, a large part of the textual strategies, literary themes, and particular motifs of Eugenides's *The Virgin Suicides* are not specific features of North American or European historiographic metafiction but, as I will try to demonstrate, are rather indebted to García Márquez's narratives. A contrastive analysis will help us establish the importance of Eugenides's so-far-undetected Colombian intertexts and cast further light on the ethical dimension of his first novel.

On Uncertainty, Memory, and Anticipation

The Virgin Suicides is written in a simple syntax, with no apparent metafictional games to interrupt the readers' assumed willing suspension of disbelief. As happens in the case of *Crónica de una muerte anunciada*, the existence of a deadly event is already announced in its title and on its first page: "On the morning the last Lisbon daughter took her turn at suicide—it was Mary this time, and sleeping pills, like Therese—the two paramedics arrived at the house knowing where the knife drawer was, and the gas oven, and the beam in the basement from which it was possible to tie a rope" (1993: 3). The readers soon learn that the Lisbon girls were five sisters and that, eventually, all of them were successful in their suicidal attempts.

As the story unfolds, it increasingly resounds with echoes that also come from García Márquez's novel *Cien años de soledad*. On many occasions, Eugenides's narrator refers to the act of remembering: "On that day he would always remember . . . Trip Fontaine came in to see . . ." (77). Together with innumerable playful variations on the phrase "years

3. Ideologically, this literary trend stands far away from minimalist premises, for its characters clearly show ethical concerns. For a recent analysis of the postmodernist novel in the USA and its modernist roots, see Geyh's evaluation of the term "postmodernism." This critic suggests three possible definitions for it while firmly believing that many "of the conceptual, epistemological, and aesthetic revolutions of modernism continue to evolve as integral parts of postmodernism" (2003: 3). See also the dense overview offered by Matustík (2003).

later": "Even years later, Trip . . ." (75), "Years later, he was still amazed . . ." (87), "Years later, when we interviewed him . . ." (240). These quotations clearly evoke the famous beginning of *Cien años de soledad*: "Muchos años después, frente al pelotón de fusilamiento, el coronel Aureliano Buendía había de recordar aquella tarde remota en que su padre lo llevó a conocer el hielo" (1985: 9).

Both the opening paragraph of García Márquez's novel and his reiterative use of the phrase "años después" have been seen by critics as marking the strong concern the Colombian author shows for the apparent circularity of time and the importance of memory to understand life (Bach 2003: 18). Memory and temporal circularity are notions that clearly link García Márquez to Anglo-Saxon modernism, as the novelist himself has mentioned on several occasions (1980: 269). Furthermore, the presence of the two themes is also abundant in *Crónica de una muerte anunciada*. In this novel, the narrator appears as a witness and investigator into the events that took place more than twenty years before, leading to the assassination of his friend Santiago Nasar. Thus, the book flows out of the narrator's necessity to re-discover what happened in the past, specifically the man who was responsible for disgracing Ángela Vicario before the day of her marriage, which is the event that unleashes her brothers' need to take revenge.

However, the memories of the different witnesses that García Márquez's narrator interviews in the course of his detective inquest do not offer the possibility of reaching any ultimate truth—"Tres personas que estaban en la pensión confirmaron que el episodio había ocurrido, pero otras cuatro no lo creyeron cierto" (1992: 34). In contemporary criticism, it is a well-known fact that the notion of uncertainty marked Anglo-Saxon modernism, later to reappear as one of the most important features of postmodern culture (McHale 1987). García Márquez soon adhered to this belief in the human incapacity to come to any form of uncontestable truth, a belief that he expressed in his continuous deflating of the authority of the narrative voice (Christie 1993: 26). Thus, in *Cien años de soledad* uncertainty is an ever-present notion and even Colonel Aureliano Buendía finally realizes that he has absolutely failed as a human being, uncertainty being his sole *reward*—"Sólo él sabía entonces que su aturdido corazón estaba condenado para siempre a la incertidumbre" (1985: 176). Echoing this theme, Eugenides reproduces in his first novel a similar situation also based on a narratorial search for the truth of events that happened more than twenty years before the narrator starts this quest for knowledge.

In *The Virgin Suicides*, the narrator's voice is itself of an *uncertain* condition. It is supposed to represent the collective perspective of an indeterminate number of mature men who, more than twenty years earlier, at the time when the suicides took place, worshipped the Lisbon sisters as their—borrowing from Buñuel's film—"obscure object of desire."[4] Like the narrator in *Crónica de una muerte anunciada*, Eugenides's narrative voice seeks to clarify the reasons that led the five sisters to commit suicide but, as in the Colombian novel, neither narrator nor readers can reach any ultimate explanation for the suicides, since the narration is clogged with alternative interpretations of the events.

In effect, a great number of witnesses and even a multitude of exhibits are not enough to provide an ultimate clarification of the suicides. Eugenides's text is full of expressions

4. The strategy clearly recalls the chorus of classic Greek tragedy as well as the postmodernist device that Onega describes as the "Borgesian dream of supra-individual authorship" (1995: 101).

of uncertainty like the following ones: "Little is known of Cecilia's state of mind. According to Mr. Lisbon . . ." (1993: 45); "Mrs. Woodhouse made her proposal, but accounts differ as to his reaction . . ." (106); or "we wanted to talk to her most of all because we felt that she, being the girls' mother, understood more than anyone why they had killed themselves. But she said, 'That's what's so frightening. I don't'" (143). Exposed to such a level of epistemological difficulties, neither narrator nor readers may reach any satisfactory solution to the puzzle posed by the girls' strange deaths. By the end of the book, the narrator can only elevate their case to the category of a public symbol that, as such, is subject to different interpretations.

However, those diverging interpretations constitute the very core of the novel's ethical demands: according to one version, the Lisbon girls become a metaphor of what is wrong with the country (231); according to another, they are scapegoats or seers, predicting the forthcoming decadence (244)—a motif that also saturates the pages of García Márquez's stories. According to a third interpretation, the girls decided to kill themselves out of sympathy with the dying of the forests brought about by relentless industrialization (245). The paradoxical result is that the level of uncertainty leaves us with the detective mystery unsolved, just as the name of the man who undid Ángela Vicario remains a mystery at the end of *Crónica de una muerte anunciada*. However, all the options put forward to explain the girls' deaths invariably refer, in one way or another, to a mixture of mythical beliefs and eco-critical ethical positions (see Gaard 2000), and are inescapably connected to a collective dissatisfaction with the present living conditions in the USA.

In other words, in the last pages of the novel the narrator elevates the story of the virgins to the category of ethicopolitical metaphor of the whole country. Similarly, critics have frequently agreed that *Cien años de soledad* is a metaphor of Latin America (Valiunas 2004: 54; Spiller 1999: 385).

Magical Reality Goes to Michigan: From Modernist Anthropology to Primordial Matriarchy

Besides the questions of narrative style and presentation of recurrent modernist and postmodernist themes, such as the above-mentioned uncertainty, decadence and circular time, there are also more specific motifs that Eugenides's novel shares with García Márquez's books, most of them also rooted in modernist anthropology and a mythical outlook on life.

Both in *Crónica de una muerte anunciada* and *The Virgin Suicides*, the young protagonists are victims of psychic repression because of strict religious beliefs. Furthermore, in both cases the girls have a dominant Catholic mother and a father who lacks the overbearing power of his wife. This motif also appears in *Cien años de soledad* in the figure of Fernanda del Carpio, whose parodic name already evokes the intransigence of the Spanish colonizers. In the case of *Crónica de una muerte anunciada*, Ángela's father is also physically blind, a well-known Freudian symbol for castration. The traditional religious code that García Márquez denounces in this novel is the same one that brings about the Lisbon girls' repression. In both cases, the mother is defined as the guardian of virtue. García Márquez writes about Ángela's mother that she "había sido maestra de escuela hasta que se casó para siempre. Su aspecto manso y un tanto afligido disimulaba

muy bien el rigor de su carácter" (1992: 36). Eugenides describes the Lisbon parents in the following terms: "On those mornings Mrs. Lisbon assumed a queenly iciness. Clutching her good purse, she checked each daughter for signs of makeup before allowing her to get in the car" (1993: 8); and "Mrs. Lisbon once more took charge of the house while Mr. Lisbon receded into a mist" (62).

There are many more instances in this later novel of the castrating role of the mother and the absent role of her husband as *pater familias*. Such notions also point to Eugenides's ironic reevaluation of patriarchal symbolism in the light of feminist post-Lacanian criticism (see Onega 1997: 103–09). In the eighties, when the writer took his MA in Creative Writing, this critical approach was already very influential in US university programs (Ruthven 1984: 19). The role played by the mother is ultimately associated to the girls' tragic ends in both novels and to the overruling presence of death and decadence, a highly reiterative theme among high modernist writers later reevaluated by feminist criticism (Kristeva 1986: 165–66, 175–76). This powerful theme, frequently present in the three novels here considered, becomes further divided into a number of motifs.

In the first pages of *Cien años de soledad*, the narrator comments on several occasions that so far nobody had been buried in Macondo (1985: 18). This motif strikingly coincides with the narrator's remark in *The Virgin Suicides* that "[t]here had never been a funeral in our town before, at least not during our lifetimes . . . Nobody's grandfather had died, nobody's grandmother, nobody's parents, only a few dogs" (1993: 35). The narrator's comments derive from the fact that the cemetery workers were on strike when the first of the Lisbon girls committed suicide. Surprisingly—*magically*—it is not until the last one dies that, "the cemetery workers' strike was settled after 409 days of arbitration" (238–39).

In both *Crónica de una muerte anunciada* and *The Virgin Suicides*, death is explicitly announced in the title of the book, a notion, closely related to the motifs of memory and anticipation, that plays the role of deflating suspense: readers know from the beginning the fate of the protagonists. Interestingly, this deflating of suspense takes the readers of both novels into the metafictional process that Thiem calls "textualization" (1995: 5–6), a narrative strategy that I further associate to the important symbolic role played by mythical cycling closure in Anglo-Saxon modernism. In both books, the technique consists in the use, at the level of the story, of words that repeat the title of the novel. "Nunca hubo una muerte más anunciada," says the narrator in *Crónica de una muerte anunciada* (55), while in *The Virgin Suicides* the collective narrator announces: "From this 'research,' she came up with the find she was most proud of: a song by the band Cruel Crux, entitled 'Virgin Suicide'" (176). Although apparently it does not look like a very radical device, this strategy of repetition is clearly metafictional and may produce in the readers the impression of a crossing of narrative levels—the level of the story and the level of the physical book, on whose cover we can read the title. The device is also associated to García Márquez' remarkable ending in *Cien años de soledad*, when the readers realize that the book in their hands *is* Melquiades's parchments. Ultimately, this metafictional strategy textually evokes the modernist interest in mythical or circular time (see Eliade 1951).

Death and decadence lead us forward to the recurrent motif of funeral rites, also explicitly present in the three novels. In *Cien años de soledad*, the ritual of death is frequently mentioned and reaches its climax in the description of the way in which José Arcadio's corpse is prepared for the funeral: "Primero lo lavaron varias veces con jabón y estropajo, después lo frotaron con sal y vinagre . . . Cuando concibieron el recurso

desesperado de sazonarlo con pimiento y comino y hojas de laurel y hervirlo un día entero a fuego lento, ya había empezado a descomponerse y tuvieron que enterrarlo a las volandas" (1985: 144). In *Crónica de una muerte anunciada*, the novelist exposes Santiago Nasar's cadaver to forensic exaggeration. Stabbed to death, his corpse has to undergo a useless autopsy that allows García Márquez to play an ironic game with the motif of the fragmentation of the body.[5] Colonel Aponte orders Padre Amador to carry out an autopsy on Nasar's corpse that the narrator soon qualifies as "una masacre," out of which "[n]os devolvieron un cuerpo distinto. La mitad del cráneo había sido destrozado con la trepanación, y el rostro del galán que la muerte había preservado acabó de perder su identidad. Además, el párroco había arrancado de cuajo las vísceras destazadas, pero al final no supo qué hacer con ellas, y les impartió una bendición de rabia y las tiró en el balde de la basura" (1992: 79). In Eugenides's tale about the fate of five middle-class girls from a Detroit suburb, we find a similarly grotesque approach to death, also manifested in the cruelty of the autopsy. Cecilia is the first to die, but her funeral is reported in a brief passage that only emphasizes the girl's small size and her youth (1993: 39). By contrast, an ontologically transgressive autopsy precedes the funeral of the other sisters. In the course of it, the coroner "opened up the girls' brains and body cavities, peering inside at the mystery of their despair" (221). In his report "written in a colorful style that made the girls' deaths as unreal as the news," the coroner cannot show any explanation for that despair. He can only explain how he had to persevere in his effort until he found "the mass of half-digested pills trapped in Therese's ileum, the strangulated section of Bonnie's esophagus, the riot of carbon monoxide in Lux's tepid blood" (221–22). Furthermore, blood had also been associated to Cecilia's second and successful attempt at suicide, highlighting the crude and violent register that Eugenides uses in his book to represent the idea of death.

Partly the inheritor of the romantic tradition and its play on the marvelous, in his novels García Márquez frequently draws a symbolic line that links the lives of his protagonists with the houses they inhabit. His strategy is carried out in such a way that his readers may perceive a metaphoric continuation of the ones into the others, with the houses becoming imbued with the spirit of their dwellers. What happens to the protagonists, deeply and magically affects the condition of their houses. The prolonged absence of Colonel Aureliano Buendía from the family house in Macondo is manifested in the latter's entropic condition (1985: 184), but it is at the moment Úrsula dies that the Buendía house experiences its most dramatic change: "Pero cuando murió Úrsula, la diligencia inhumana de Santa Sofía de la Piedad, su tremenda capacidad de trabajo empezaron a quebrantarse. No era solamente que estuviera vieja y agotada, sino que la casa se precipitó de la noche a la mañana en una crisis de senilidad" (374). Similarly, in *Crónica de una muerte anunciada*, the narrator reports that the house that Ángela's bridegroom had bought and refurbished for them to live in after the marriage, was abandoned after the tragic events and fell an easy prey to thieves who sacked it of all valuables (1992: 87). Eugenides's novel reproduces this motif on several occasions, explicitly referring to the close link existing between the fate of the characters and the physical condition of their

5. We should take into account that the ancient motif of the dismemberment of the body is one of the primitive rituals described by Frazer in *The Golden Bough* (1915). Later anthropologists, such as Joseph Campbell in *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (1949, 1968), emphasized the ritualistic and representational character of this motif.

house. After Mrs. Lisbon decides to shut the house from the public gaze, a cloud starts to hover over its roof and the collective narrator assumes that the only explanation is Mrs. Lisbon's will for it to happen (1993: 141). Gradually, the house falls into an entropic condition until the narrator asserts, "[n]ow the house truly died" (162), a fact confirmed by a disagreeable odor that emanates from the place. The neighbors cannot get rid of the smell, which seems to be as excessive as that coming from José Arcadio Buendía's corpse. After the girls have committed suicide, their parents decide to have their house vacated of all things inside and sell it. This circumstance allows the neighboring boys—and collective narrator of the story—to take some of the items that belonged to the girls, echoing again what happens to Ángela's belongings in *Crónica de una muerte anunciada*—her "maletita de mano" being recuperated by the narrator from the house she never came to inhabit as a married woman (1992: 87). Furthermore, if the House of Buendía practically collapses when Úrsula dies, when the Lisbon house is finally emptied of all things, it looks more run-down than ever and seems, the collective narrator says, "to have collapsed from the inside, like a lung" (1993: 241).

The beginning of one of the chapters in *Cien años de soledad* offers one of the best examples of its author's capacity to exaggerate his presentation of a reality that thus appears to be magical. In an often-quoted passage, the narrator summarizes many of the remarkable events in Colonel Aureliano Buendía's biography, an apparently heroic life that nevertheless led him nowhere but to the final understanding of his miserable solitude: "El coronel Aureliano Buendía promovió treinta y dos levantamientos armados y los perdió todos. Tuvo diecisiete hijos varones de diecisiete mujeres distintas, que fueron exterminados uno tras otro en una sola noche, antes de que el mayor cumpliera treinta y cinco años. Escapó a catorce atentados, a setenta y tres emboscadas y a un pelotón de fusilamiento. . . " (1985: 114). Echoing the Colonel's exuberant character, in *The Virgin Suicides* Trip Fontaine stands out as a new Casanova figure when the narrator affirms that he has made love to four hundred and eighteen girls and women "during his long career" as a playboy (1993: 75). Thus, if in a book like *Cien años de soledad* we have excessive presentations of characters such as the Colonel or Remedios la Bella—who is even lifted up to the heavens like the Virgin Mary (1985: 250–51)—in *The Virgin Suicides* other events point towards the magical quality of living near the Lisbon house. Eugenides's readers are further informed that Mr. Lisbon sees Cecilia's ghost (1993: 61); that all the sisters "appeared to have two extra canine teeth" (63); or that one of the boys is able to "analyze a woman's emotional makeup by the taste of her mouth" (130).

Other motifs, also reiterative in the Colombian writer's oeuvre, further support this uncanny reality opened to mysterious spaces. One of them was reevaluated by the development of psychology and its impact on modernist and postmodernist culture: the use of doubles or identical twin characters. The motif is already present in *Cien años de soledad*, in the characters of Aureliano Segundo and José Arcadio Segundo, who can confuse everybody about their personalities when they choose to do so (1985: 194). García Márquez extends the topic also to the characters who murder Santiago Nasar in *Crónica de una muerte anunciada* when his narrator asserts that Pedro and Pablo Vicario "[e]ran gemelos" (1992, 21), a fact that allows the narrator to play with the different character traits they have, differences that become totally obliterated at the moment of the killing. In an exaggerated manner, in his novel Eugenides extends the motif of the double to all the sisters, despite the fact that they were not twins, as well as to the boys, infatuated with

them, who collectively undertake the narration years later. Uncertainty plays here an important part again: "Cecilia writes of her sisters and herself as a single entity" (1993: 42). Even the collective narrative voice is ready to assert the existence of another reflexive condition: "We knew that the girls were our twins, that we all existed in space like animals with identical skins" (43). This holistic condition extensively impedes the boys to be "sure which girl was which" (122), while the girls—anticipating the peculiarity of the narrator—act and sense in a collective way.

Other topics further develop this magical and transgressive dimension of the girls, strongly framed by the author's borrowings from the magical-realist mode. As happens in *Cien años de soledad*, in Eugenides's book there is a plague that openly manifests itself in the middle of the girls' sufferings. If, in the case of García Márquez's novel, the birds start dying when Úrsula dies and news of the Wandering Jew reach Macondo (1985: 358), in *The Virgin Suicides* a natural and reiterative event—the annual coming of a plague of fish flies to the Detroit suburb—is also elevated to the symbolic category of biblical disease. The fish flies die when the first of the virgins succeeds in committing suicide (1993: 56), but are back to coat the collective narrator's windows when the other girls have finally followed their sister's sad fortune (201). The apparition of this satanic symbol contrasts with the girls' declared *divine* character, as epitomized by their care and worshipping of the elm tree in their garden, a tree condemned by the city council to be cut down due to the risks of spreading a disease, but whose fate is temporarily postponed thanks to the virgins' opposition (178). The motif offers a clear anthropological connection with the symbolic role of the tree as interpreted in *The Golden Bough*. In Frazer's elucidation, all along what he denominates the "stage of magic" the tree symbolizes the basic link between the heavens and the earth, the source of the spirit of life (1987: 125–27, 296–323, 703–07). This spirit is itself manifested in *The Book of Genesis* in the Tree of Knowledge, from whose forbidden fruit Adam and Eve ate, thus becoming conscious of good and evil, and of their own mortality. Through Frazer's influence, some of the most famous modernist writers symbolized the condition of knowledge in different ways, among them, William Faulkner in the tree that Caddy climbs in *The Sound in the Fury*. García Márquez recaptures the sacredness of the ancient symbol with his political metaphor of José Arcadio Buendía, the patriarch who ends his days chained to the tree in the courtyard of their house. He is the Adam of the Colombian family and, as such, the first person to fall prey to the need to know everything, an enlightened impulse that eventually brings about the disappearance of the House of the Buendías.

In *The Virgin Suicides*, though, the priestly role that the narrator explicitly attributes to the girls goes beyond their association with magic rituals referred to the divinity of trees (1993: 183–84). Their condition of virginity also connects them openly to the role played by the Virgin in Catholic iconography.[6] The girls communicate by means of messages

6. The obvious exception is Lux, who becomes a very promiscuous girl and has sex with a number of men on the roof of the Lisbon house. In her behavior, she shows the author's exaggerated rendering of a reality that belongs in the realm of magical realism, while also ironically commenting on the virgin/whore duality of Jung's *anima* archetype (1971: 24–31). Gilbert and Gubar reevaluated this ambivalence from feminist premises in their groundbreaking study *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979). Kristeva's attribution of Mary's virginity to an error in translation (1986: 63), throws further light on Eugenides's feminist sources for his intertextual contestation of patriarchal symbolism.

written at the back of pictures of the Virgin (14, 188), and the Catholic Church becomes an explicit element in their story not only as a possible source for their sexual repression but, paradoxically, also as a symbolic religious palimpsest for the virgins' more primitive and magical character. Such a character also links them to old Mrs. Karafilis, a telepathic Greek matriarch who also shares elements in common with García Márquez's Úrsula Iguarán (herself a literary sibling of Faulkner's Dilsey).

In addition, the girls are explicitly associated with the mythological sirens in their lurid attempts to attract the boys to their rescue (205). Eugenides also re-enacts the dichotomy that modernist mythical discourse allotted woman both as an evil temptress and as the gentle mother of the Earth. Borrowing from Jung's archetypal *anima*, Joseph Campbell also interpreted this dualistic patriarchal pattern as a symbolic anthropological function in his influential study of the monomyth (1968: 109–26). In other words, all along Eugenides's book, there is a sustained tension mostly produced by the narrative voice, between its presentation of the girls as possible incarnations of a primordial matriarchal spirit and the contrastive understanding of the Lisbon sisters as dangerous objects of male desire (see Kristeva's "Stabat Mater" 1986: 176–80; compare to Frazer 1987: 393–424 and 712). As stated above, the end of the novel eventually favors the mythical understanding of the girls as priestesses of Mother Earth who offer themselves as scapegoats in a fertility rite meant to bring about the regeneration of life (231, 244–45). This reading would obviously help us clarify the reasons for the recurrent use of notions of decadence, death, blood, and funeral rites mentioned earlier. In this way, intertextually woven with García Márquez's narratives and feminist critical issues, *The Virgin Suicides* ultimately advocates a return to the ancestral wisdom of Mother Earth worship prior to its displacement by the patriarchal ideology that, the novel contends, is responsible for the impending destruction of the planet. This reading is enhanced by the fact that both in *Crónica de una muerte anunciada* and in Eugenides's narrative, people are expectantly waiting for the murder or the suicides to take place, as if they were primitive spectators of a mythical ritual aimed at bringing about the continuity of life. While in *Crónica de una muerte anunciada* spectators take positions in Macondo's main square to witness the crime (1992: 108), the indeterminate group of boys who eventually narrate the story of the virgins watch their house expecting the suicides to take place (1993: 219, 231).

Besides these intertextual links enhancing the perception of a magical reality, three other features throw some more light on the grounds shared by both writers and on the ethical compromise that the writer from Michigan demands from the pages of his first novel.

In the first part of Cervantes's masterpiece, the priest, the barber, the housekeeper, and Don Quixote's niece carry out a parodic *auto-da-fé* by burning a large number of the protagonist's chivalry books, an episode that inspired many a good page in the fiction written in the second half of the twentieth century. Echoing *Don Quixote*, Colonel Aureliano Buendía decides to burn all his manuscripts once he becomes aware of the miserable type of life he has been living so far. For him, his writings are a symbol of his past and he tries to erase it by destroying the manuscripts together with all material traces of his previous life (1985: 186). In his first novel, Eugenides reinstalls the episode, but again in the form of somebody who, by so doing, imposes her will on one of the protagonist's. This time Mrs. Lisbon burns Lux's records, expecting in this way to put an end to her daughters' earthly temptations (1993: 144). Instead, the episode marks the beginning of Lux's

promiscuity and different witnesses see her "copulating on the roof with faceless boys and men" (145). The young girl's parodic reenactment of ancient fertility rituals, where she plays the part of the priestess or *Queen* of the Wood, anticipates her necessary sacrifice for the world (Frazer 1987: 710–11). As happens to Colonel Buendía, the *auto-da-fé* symbolizes the beginning of a new role for her, here related to the necessity of regenerating a life exhausted by life-denying post-industrial demands.

The stories devised by both García Márquez and Eugenides take place in little communities: Macondo and the middle-class town that evokes the Detroit suburb where the Greek-American novelist grew up. The former, as many critics have pointed out, functions as a microcosm of Latin America, becoming the battleground where the indigenous, the colonial, and the postcolonial clash and influence one another (Irvine 1998), but we should not forget that the creation of Macondo is itself influenced by Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha county. As the Colombian writer affirms, "[e]l condado Yoknapatawpha tiene riberas en el Mar Caribe, así que de alguna manera Faulkner es un escritor del Caribe, de alguna manera es un escritor latinoamericano" (1968: 52–53; qtd. in Cohn 1999: 60–61). Now, following García Márquez's source backwards, Eugenides recuperates the banks of the Mississippi river and progresses north, to the Detroit area. He does so to tell the magical story of five girls, members of the same family, who committed suicide for reasons never fully explained,[7] but who were finally elevated to the category of symbols representing the ethical necessity to fight back the decadence of their post-industrial patriarchal society (1993: 244–45).

Finally, there is one special passage in *The Virgin Suicides* that connects most clearly with one of the great themes that underpin *Cien años de soledad*. Gifted with a special sensitivity, one of the boys, Joe Hill Conley, comments "years later" that there was "an ancient pain arising from Mrs. Lisbon, the sum of her people's griefs. 'She came from a sad race,' he said. 'It wasn't only Cecilia. The sadness had started long before. Before America. The girls had it, too'" (120). Eugenides's preferred term *sadness* has replaced García Márquez's *solitude*. However, the statement that the condition of the Lisbon women had started before their ancestors came to America stresses once more the girls' role as priestesses of ancient matriarchal power. Moreover, the quotation also offers one more connective element with *Cien años de soledad*, where indigenous (primitive), colonial and postcolonial are the main forces that help the author to draw the Buendía family's history as a metaphor of Latin America.

Conclusion: Myth and Ethics Move Steadily North

Within the long-lasting debate on the notion of "magical realism," many critics share nowadays the conviction that this fictional mode reproduces the *dialogic* co-existence of two or more juxtaposed cultures (Bowers 2004: 83–95). Some years ago, Amaryll Chanady

7. Again, Kristeva's "Stabat Mater" may throw some light on the fates allotted to the girls, connecting Frazer's stage of magic to Catholicism: "[A] concrete woman, worthy of the feminine ideal embodied by the Virgin as an inaccessible goal, could only be a nun, a *martyr* or . . . one who leads a life that would remove her from the 'earthly' condition and dedicate her to the highest sublimation alien to her body" (1986: 181; my emphasis).

referred to the importance of this cultural juxtaposition in the following terms: "In fact, magic realism is often defined as the juxtaposition of two different rationalities—the Indian and the European—in a syncretic fictitious world-view based on the simultaneous existence of several entirely different cultures in Latin America" (1986: 55). Scholars have extended this view in the sense that magical realism sprouts from the critical analysis of one or different aboriginal cultures that were subject to colonization—mostly by European countries, while they were also frequently neo-colonized by the United States. Thus, magical-realist writers of the stature of García Márquez would actually accomplish a creative *postcolonial* criticism of the existing social conditions (Irvine 1998: 53–56; Bowers 2004: 95–102). Within the territory of the United States, the discussion has also been furthered by contemporary borderlands critics who understand that the country's status quo shows an imperialist behavior against its own minorities. This situation suggests the existence of appropriate conditions in the USA for the manifestation of their own magical-realist mode (Manzanas and Benito 2003: 49–50).

More than twenty years after the suicides have happened, the collective male voice narrating the events evaluates them again and, in retrospect, suggests the magical condition of the five sisters, a condition reinforced, as we have considered, by the large number of themes and topics that *The Virgin Suicides* shares with García Márquez's two novels. Such condition clearly marks the existence of a dialogic contrast between the magical, collective and female-oriented realm, and post-industrial individualistic life in the United States. Echoing the Colombian writer's literary mode, in *The Virgin Suicides* the juxtaposition of cultures is reiteratively present. The Lisbon family—whose name suggests an Iberian stock—is Catholic and lives in a country where a multiplicity of cultures is trying to coexist under the premises of a post-industrial consumerist society. In this complex postcolonial site, Eugenides extends his censure of the status quo to the ecological and gender clash existing between post-industrial patriarchy and the magical spirit symbolized in the girls. The collision of cultures is, therefore, also an ideologically complex one, between patriarchal Catholicism—which easily adapted to the individualistic money-oriented corruption of the American Dream (see Hume 2000: 288–89)—and the worshippers of an ancient female holistic wisdom that had been erased by it. Such spiritual wisdom, therefore, is installed in the novel as guarantor of a pre-scientific (pre-patriarchal, pre-industrial) ethical code (Levinas 1989: 82–84; Falzon 1998: 90–99) that, coming from an alleged matriarchal origin, allows for the inclusion of the other—in the Levinasian sense—while offering a clear contrast with patriarchal life-denying individualistic codes.

Written by a contemporary US author who belongs, it should be borne in mind, to the dominant white class (even if hyphenated), *The Virgin Suicides* openly demands the return of an invigorating sense of purpose, an ethical coming back to the values of collective identity and the restoration of the bonds between human being and nature, self and world. Such an impulse offers readers the possibility to enter an ethical dialogue with the more prosaic and pragmatic implications of living in contemporary post-industrial USA (Falzon 1998: 57–78). By resorting to literary sources that belong to a cultural line critical of mere realistic—and minimalist—representations of reality, in his intertextual and dialogical analysis Eugenides ultimately defends the existence of an alternative understanding of life where values still mean something important, even if we cannot fix their origins in any precise categorical manner.

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