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Angels of Allegory and Experience: Laura Restrepo's *Dulce compañía* and Gabriel García Márquez's "Un señor muy viejo con unas alas enormes"

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ABSTRACT: Establishing an intertextual relation between Restrepo's novel and García Márquez's story, this paper examines how Restrepo's paired commitment to socio-political relevance and to broad legibility shapes her novel's engagement with the legacy of magic realism and with discursive, especially novelistic, conventions more generally. A comparative analysis of thematic and formal features highlights how this commitment molds *Dulce compañía*'s recapitulation of the theme of the angel of flesh and blood within an updated, urban context, and in a commercially successful novel with an international readership. Focusing on narrative and figurative, especially allegorical, discourses, I consider that while the angel allegory in "Un señor muy viejo" is used to excavate literary-rhetorical issues of representation (as argued by Carlos Rincón), in *Dulce compañía* it is oriented towards the preservative revelation of popular forms of belief that emerge from the lived experience of violence and abandonment.

KEYWORDS: Laura Restrepo, Gabriel García Márquez, allegory, angels, magic realism, novel

El más socorrido realismo mágico

Seemingly out of nowhere, for no one knows where, a stranger said to be an angel shows up in an isolated and poor district in Colombia. Word spreads and popular exhibitions of this creature are organized, not without profit to themselves, by members of the community. The angel becomes a local celebrity as the faithful and the curious flock to see him. Some are disappointed or confused because the so-called angel speaks no comprehensible language, pays no notice to his audience. He does not do much of anything and does not easily conform to the conventional image of an angel. His nature and identity remain uncertain: Is he or is he not an angel? If not, who or what is he? Priests warn that rather than an angel, he may be a demon. The angel, or whatever he is, proves to be disabled, and seems further debilitated by the confinement imposed by his managers. Finally, he recovers his strength and liberates himself, leaving behind a community largely unaltered by the marvelous upheaval of his advent.

This skeletal sketch provides a basic outline both of Gabriel García Márquez's 1968 short story, "Un señor muy viejo con unas alas enormes," and of Laura Restrepo's 1995 novel *Dulce compañía*. In both fictions, the arrival of an extraordinary being unsettles the matter-of-fact narrative in ways that highlight matters of fact, matters of being, and matters of representation. Yet while interviewers, reviewers, and scholars sometimes note a family resemblance, or occasional echo, between Restrepo's novel and García Márquez's work, only a single reviewer names a specific parallel between this novel and that story.[1] Further, a common description of the novel used by Spanish language commercial websites assures readers that the narrative proceeds "sin caer en el socorrido realismo mágico," that is, without recourse to the literary mode perhaps most stereotypically associated with García Márquez and the Latin American Boom.[2] I read this assertion, first, as a salute to Laura Restrepo's novelistic innovation. One of the most popular and awarded post-Boom Latin American women writers, Restrepo charts her own literary course outside the well-worn stylistic byways of her masculine predecessors. At the same time, we might have here a lightly coded assurance of the novel's accessibility. "Magic realism" can be a kind of shorthand used to gesture toward a range of experimental techniques characteristic of the "long, intellectually challenging, and often hard-to-read novels" of the Boom (González 126). With its circular temporal structure unfolded in the prophecies of Melquíades's notebooks, *Cien años de soledad* might suggest that texts represent, not an external reality, but only other texts, or even that all reality is ultimately prescripted, that is, fictional. We are assured that Restrepo steers clear of such bewildering metafictional games, of all that "complexity, fragmentation, tortuousness, and sheer difficulty that had come to be seen as synonymous with the Boom" (Swanson 83).[3] Restrepo is a contemporary Colombian writer; she is dealing in *Dulce compañía* with an overtly marvelous theme: the apparition of a flesh and blood angel.[4] Further, the miraculous reality of this apparition is witnessed in the text, not only by the narrator's first-hand experience, but also by the inclusion, as an integral part of the novel, of textual "evidence" from mystical, angelic notebooks. Nonetheless, we can rest assured that our reading will proceed unencumbered by literary magic tricks that might compromise intelligibility.

Restrepo highlights the provision of readerly access as the primary obligation that shapes her writing: "tender puentes hacia la gente" (Lirot 347). This concern with direct rhetorical accessibility intersects with socio-political commitments, especially the commitment to preserve marginalized experience from "el virus borratiza" (Restrepo 186). As we shall see, both are thematized in the novel through the character and role of the narrator and through the nature, history, and use of the angelic notebooks.[5] This work against erasure is always stylistic and formal; if Restrepo's novels, which treat social, cultural, and political issues of consequence, are not legible, they do not reach the people and so, practically speaking, are erased.

Attention to the recapitulation in *Dulce compañía* of the cultural legacy, narrative themes, and representational issues identified with magic realism in general, and, in particular, with "Un señor muy viejo," clarifies the correspondence between Restrepo's cultural-aesthetic and socio-political commitments. *Dulce compañía* does not so much cast aside the weighty legacy of the marvelous, as accept and redistribute the burden of its representation across a narrative formally and ethically committed to delivering popular access to a range of rhetorical registers, from the colloquial and realistic to the highly stylized and allegorical, and to a spectrum of experience, from the everyday and banal to the ecstatic and miraculous.

In what follows, I examine thematic and formal echoes between Restrepo's novel and García Márquez's short story, highlighting how Restrepo's commitment to broad relevance and legibility shapes the novel's recapitulation of the theme of the angel of flesh and blood, its representation of an updated, urban socio-cultural context, and its handling of narrative discourse. I compare the use of allegory in "Un señor muy viejo" and in *Dulce compañía* to show how Restrepo renovates the marvelous relevance of the allegorized angel while she reorientates toward greater legibility metafictional and philosophical issues imported by this figure, largely through their explicit articulation by the narrator. I conclude by looking at the multiplicity of allegories of the angel that proliferate, especially at the end of the novel, in ways that highlight socio-economic marginalization, underscore the creativity of popular faith, and communicate the need for protection and transcendence generated by contemporary experience. While allegory in "Un señor muy viejo" primarily is used to excavate literary-rhetorical issues of representation, in *Dulce compañía* it is oriented more towards the revelation of popular forms of belief that emerge from living contexts of hardship, inequality, and abandonment (Rincón; Melis 126).

Most globally perhaps, Restrepo's authorial commitment to "reader friendliness" takes shape as a multi-level motif appearing in its title, in the character of its narrator protagonist, and in its treatment of the angelic discourses transcribed by the local woman Ara in her fifty-three notebooks. Fragments of these extraordinary discourses sit side by side with narrator Mona's account. Quite literally, the two accompany each other in the formation of the novel itself. Reiterating this motif intertextually, here I consider the "dulce compañía" established between Restrepo's novel and García Márquez's story.

In meta-discursive terms, the motif of "dulce compañía" points to the cross-categorical pairing structurally framed through the novel's oscillation between the narrator's realistic text and the marvelous, allegorical text of the angelic discourses. On both a thematic and discursive level, this reflexivity takes shape in *Dulce compañía* as a dialectic between the mundane and the marvelous, the conventional and the transcendent, the colloquial and the esoteric, which may guide an understanding of its pairing here with "Un señor muy viejo," itself one of the most well-worn exemplars of magic realism's enigmatic experimentation. Colombian literary scholar Carlos Rincón defines the status of "Un señor muy viejo" in the corpus of twentieth-century Latin American literature as "el más socorrido ejemplo para ilustrar las áreas temáticas y formales del realismo mágico" (12). He outlines how its unfaltering presence in school and university curricula has established it as the canonical representative of "los valores de transgresión y subversión estética y sociopolítica (12).[6] Accordingly, it seems that this story is "el más socorrido ejemplo" of the very mode, "el socorrido realismo mágico," that *Dulce compañía* engages to update and redirect through more accessible channels toward more socially engaged ends. By the nineties when *Dulce compañía* was written, magic realism, with "Un señor muy viejo" as a textbook example, had become familiar as a set of established conventions commonly associated with Latin American literature. It becomes a kind of brand in the international market.[7] Thus, predictably, the vanguard slips into consumerist conformity. Even beyond thematic parallels, then, the story's place in literary culture and imagination accommodates an intertextual reading with *Dulce compañía* that underscores the dexterity with which the novel exploits the legibility of established conventions, like those of magic realism, even in its self-conscious distancing from them, to renovate the literary and broader cultural currency of the marvelous.[8]

Early in the novel, the Colombian national-cultural canonicity of the marvelous is disparaged by the narrator protagonist, Mona, a journalist who approaches with skeptical indifference her assignment to cover the story of a reputed angel in Galilea, a poor neighborhood in the hills of Bogotá. Young, urban, educated, Mona has lost her capacity for wonder and sharpened her consciousness of cultural neo-imperialism. Before she begins her journey to Galilea, Mona is weary of Colombia's surfeit of indigenous miracles. Further, she despises her editor's servile chasing after North American trends, like the vogue for all things angel which, now that it is passé in the North, is picked up by South American media:

> Colombia es el país del mundo donde más milagros se dan por metro cuadrado.... Gozamos desde siempre del monopolio internacional del suceso irracional y paranormal, y sin embargo, si era justamente ahora—y no un mes antes ni un mes después—que el jefe de redacción quería

> un artículo sobre aparición de ángel, era solo porque el tema acababa de pasar de moda en Estados Unidos. (17) [9]

These reflections register the narrator's initial, and redoubled, dismissal of her assignment's, and the novel's, theme. Reprising a stock character in Colombia's popular cultural landscape, the angel story is hackneyed: "Es lo común… la nacionalidad no sobrevive sin altas dosis diarias de superstición" (17). As an effort of the editor to mimic North American trends, it is derivative and pathetic. Far from authentically marvelous, the angel of Galilea comes to Mona as a subject already colonized, a figure that may be indigenous to popular belief but one that the global media industry has stamped with its own currency. In the ambit of this industry, angels are just another commercialized trend whose circulation tracks the distance between the "first" and all other worlds, and reinscribes regional culture as "local color," an "added value" for transnational markets (Herrero-Olaizola 43-46; Yúdice 641). The novel, then, begins by inoculating itself against an anticipated critique of its tacit complicity in the cultural appropriation and exploitation characteristic of the cultural industry within neo-liberalism.[10] If, as a novel, *Dulce compañía* accepts what might be construed as the aesthetic and ethical "compromises" of international commercial popularity for the compensation of a readership beyond the confines of a specialized cultural elite, it does so with eyes wide open.[11]

Compañía narrativa

Dulce compañía's first-person narrator is the chief means by which the novel extends access to the reader. Whereas "Un señor muy viejo" casts the epistemological and metaphysical uncertainties generated by its marvelous protagonist onto a metafictional plane, in the novel, Mona's realistic, pragmatic narrative reorients these onto the level of direct diegesis. In his story, García Márquez creates the surface ambience of a traditional folkloric tale with an impersonal third-person narrator, "flat" characters, generalized locale, linear chronological narrative, and, for the most part, simple diction and syntax. However, the surface ease and simplicity of the story, coupled with its fantastic and inexplicable content, generates unanswered questions which propel interpretation to a figurative, and here, metafictional level. For example, while the embedded tale of the spider woman comes with a conventional, and enunciated, moral lesson, fully legible to the community, the narrative articulates no such allegorical "moral" relevant to the old man with wings (14-15). Members of the community entertain various speculations about his identity and intentions, but none of these is borne out in the narrative (11). While his identity as an "angel" is nominally adopted by the narrator, it remains compromised both by alternative proposals about his identity (a shipwrecked Norwegian?), and, even more, by his lack of conformity with what the community and readers know about angels.

The narrator remains impassive: he persists without comment in the production of events, characters, and speech that are overcharged with figurative meaning. Further, deadpan, he supplies information about characters and events that satirically undercuts the moral neutrality of the surface tone. This shows especially clearly in the satire against the church and in the exposure of the callous self-interest of the locals (11-12; 15-16). That is, while maintaining the narrative's posture within a single, surface register of enunciation, the narrator manages to confound the reader's confidence in the adequacy of this register. Thus, the story generates questions about knowing, being, and interpretation, about what the old man is, how we might know this, and what it might mean, that remain unresolved. So, as postcolonial critic Kumkum Sangari puts it in her discussion of García Márquez's work, such questions are "thrown onto another plane" of reality potentially accessible to the reader but not explicitly signposted by the narrative (903). In a sense, the narrative of "Un señor muy viejo" abandons these questions, leaving the reader to go it alone.

In contrast, *Dulce compañía* supplies the reader with the guiding companionship of its personable and analytical first-person narrator. Through its achievement of emotional and psychological realism, the first-person narration provides readers with the subjective intimacy long-established as a classic novelistic expectation.[12] This narrator abounds in the individuating traits absent from that of "Un señor muy viejo"; prominent among these is gender. The feminine focus and feminist commitment of *Dulce compañía* saturate the narrative content and sensibility (Cruz Calvo; Díaz Zambrana). It is as a woman that Mona is admitted to the all-female "junta" that, in defiance of the patriarchal authority of the church, manages the cult of the angel of Galilea; it is as a woman that Mona becomes emotionally attached to this being and, finally, mother to his child. Through her reflective, sometimes agonizing, account of her encounter with this "other world" of the Bogotá slum and its sacred ecstasies, Mona provides the reader with a personal guide to the marvelous, a thoughtful companion through the jumble of emotions and the tangle of questions this encounter generates.

An investigative journalist, Mona is always asking questions, probing motive and logic, puzzling together bits of information. Thus, while her perspective is subjectively "limited" to her own perceptions and experience, and so less potentially "authoritative" than that of an omniscient third-person narrator, the methods of her profession supply a procedure that orients and guides the reader, processing, if not always resolving, the questions that emerge from the encounter with the marvelous. As Mona approaches Galilea seeking information for her story, the narrative follows along step-by-step, relating a series of interviews she conducts with members of the community, reporting her questions and their answers in direct speech. The reader accompanies Mona in her project of discovery and, at any point in the story, always has as much, and only as much, information as she has. Reader and narrator are partners on this quest to elucidate the mysteries of Galilea and uncover the true history of the angel.

Questioning is a habit of mind for Mona. Her narrative abounds with questions posed not only to interview subjects but also to herself. In this way, she takes on experientially and articulates for the reader the "pressure" that the encounter with the marvelous puts on perception and understanding (Sangari 903): "¿Qué clase de criatura me irían a monstrar?" (35); "Qué hacía semejante ser encerrado a oscuras entre una cueva?"; "O sería que el proprio muchacho también era cómplice del montaje?"; "Tal vez el muchacho estaba honestamente convencido de que era un ángel. O tal vez era un ángel... ¿Por qué no?" (45). These are the kinds of questions that the narrative of "Un señor muy viejo" tacitly generates but leaves outside its domain of discourse, "projecting" them onto that other register of interpretation for the reader to address independently. In *Dulce compañía*, such questions are formulated in direct narration, within empirical, rational ways of knowing; however, they approach the limit of this epistemology, gesturing to possibilities beyond: "O tal vez era un ángel... ¿Por qué no?" So, while the novel opens inquiries that it ultimately recognizes as undiscoverable, even these are isolated and defined as such, as we see here and in the later consideration of the origin of the angelic notebooks (57-58).

In contrast with the resolute impassivity of García Márquez's narrator, Mona's encounter with the angel is cognitively and emotionally charged. It is disorienting, transformative, and incites a torment of emotional ecstasy: "Después de ese día nada volvió a ser igual. ... Me había enloquecido su excesiva dulzura, su misterio y su silencio me sacaron de mi eje. ... desde ya confieso que lo mío por él fue totalmente así: agonía de corazón ardido que se desangra de amor" (96-97). Certainly, this encounter challenges Mona's "professional objectivity," which she always has had trouble maintaining: "Los colegas siempre me han achacado falto de profesionalismo por mi incapacidad de mantener la objetividad y la distancia frente a mis temas" (79). Yet, the very acknowledgement of one's vulnerability to subjective bias is a gesture of objective self-awareness. That is, Mona's self-questioning does not finally affirm a weakness—her vulnerability to subjective sway—but a strength: her ability to think through a dialectic between the subjective and objective that activates, not the dominance of one over the other, but the auxiliary consciousness of each in relation to the other.

Further, the subjectivity of her response conforms to the psychological verisimilitude and emotional accessibility of her narrative. What she encounters in Galilea *is* outlandish. She has entered another world: "había entrado a un reino que no estaba de este mundo" (33): and there she has found "una criatura de otra esfera de realidad" (43). Rather than a professional obstacle, then, her subjective involvement becomes a catalyst for expanded understanding and for her professional transformation from journalist to novelist.

At the start of the narrative, Mona voices her frustration with the frivolous stories she is assigned at *Somos* which consistently have disappointed her hope of writing about "cosas que valieran la pena" (15). At the end of the novel, with the salvaged angelic notebooks in hand, Mona announces her newly established commitment to literature: "ésa fue la primera vez, pero no la última, en que yo me aferré a la literatura" (190). The experience with the angel of Galilea and access to the mystical notebooks have revealed to Mona not only something worth writing about, but also a new, literary, specifically novelistic, way of writing it. Meta-discursively, these comments chart Mona's development from journalist to novelist. Alongside her skeptical self-examination, her subjective investment in the events, people, and texts she encounters animates and sustains an oscillation that swings across the frontiers of objectivity and subjectivity, of the empirical and the marvelous, to produce the text we are reading, one achieved through this characteristically literary license of novelistic reflexivity. Concomitantly, they signal the production of the novel we are reading as a creative collaboration between the mystical notebooks and Mona's own realistic narrative and so underscore its typically novelistic heteroglossia (Bakhtin).

The self-conscious dialectic between the realistic and the miraculous, between modern skepticism and popular belief, that is developed as part of the very character of the narration and incorporated into the very fabric of the novel, is key to the novel's presentation of the marvelous within a contemporary Latin American post-colonial context. Literary scholar Samuel Jaramillo González elaborates the interaction *Dulce compañía* establishes between two segregated worlds, that of the city of Bogotá and that of the hillside slum of Galilea: "Se trata de universos que hacen caso omiso uno del otro a pesar de su contigüidad: en la novela la aparición de un ángel posibilita un contacto fugaz que revela su existencia mutual, para volver a cerrarse sobre sí mismos" (151; Navia 23). Yet, while the lived contact between these two geographically and socio-economically distinct zones is fleeting, confined in the narrative to a brief period after which Mona returns to her work in Bogotá and life in Galilea resumes its customary routine, the interactive translation between their respective epistemologies and "cosmovisions" is preserved discursively in the novel itself. That is, the novel sustains both worlds within its own structural and epistemological frameworks, thus textually actualizing this aspect of the historical reality of postcolonial culture.

As Jaramillo González notes, these two worlds are often considered not simply as geographically, socially, and economically distinct, but also as inhabiting different temporal epochs that name different cultural stages: "modernidad y premodernidad" (152; Navia 23). Likewise, Sangari highlights the "cultural simultaneity" registered in postcolonial narratives: "In Latin America... different modes of production, different social formations, and different ways of seeing overlap as the ground of conflict, contradiction, change, and intervention, both local and foreign" (902). With its postcolonial consciousness, the narrative in *Dulce compañía* preserves as its theme, and as the condition of its own existence, the "cultural simultaneity" of these different, routinely segregated, zones, and so, on a discursive level, restores from oblivion consciousness of the interdependence between the spheres of privilege and oppression.

Mona's narrative, then, takes place in this socio-cultural over-

lap between these zones. Her contact with this other world is authentic but finally does not entail absorption into it. She experiences the wonder and ecstasy of the angelic presence, but never gives herself over to the popular, absolute faith of the devout followers. She cautions at the start: "a pesar... de que recibí el bautismo y la formación cristiana, en realidad nunca fui practicante, y tal vez ni siquiera creyente. Y sigo sin serlo: lo recalco desde ya para que nadie se prevenga—o se entusiasme—pensando que ésta es la historia de una conversión" (18-19). After all, the idea is not that the marvelous becomes subsumed by the realistic, or vice versa, but that both are placed in a relation that elucidates or even transfigures each. And, as we explore in the next section, this is exactly the relation the novel generates between Mona's narrative and the passages of angelic discourse that stand beside it in every chapter save the last.

Alegorías del ángel de carne y hueso

The heavily allegorical writing in these angelic fragments establishes another ground of the novel's relation with García Márquez's story. Several literary critics offer allegorical readings of the story, looking at its inverted Biblical allusions, at what it might be saying about myth, about the marvelous, about society (Cohn; Erdal; Penuel; Yviricu).[13] Certainly, the story invites allegorical interpretation: the reticence of the narrator, the ambiguity of the marvelous creature's nature and identity, and the inconclusive treatment of the questions it generates—all create the sense that there is more going on here than we are being told. But, despite the differing emphases of their readings, until Rincón's decisive essay in 2002, literary scholars uniformly accepted the marvelous figure as some kind of angel "de carne y hueso"; a few even explored intertextual relations between García Márquez's story and other Latin American stories with angel protagonists (Boergson; Coria-Sánchez). In contrast, Rincón persuasively insists that the titular figure finally represents not an angel, but a purposively inaccessible (to the popular community, to the narrator, and, it seems, to most readers and critics) textual rendition of the visual allegory of Father Time: "La alegoría del Tiempo es un señor muy viejo con unas alas enormes" (27). By teasing characters and readers with this esoteric figure of Father Time, the story elicits their reliance on an allegory, that of the angel, that it always disappoints. Thus it furnishes "la demonstración maravillosa y archicómica de la simultánea necesidad e imposibilidad de representación visible o narrada de lo no representado y no representable, que mueve al empleo de la alegoría y a la dicción metafórica" (34). Rincón's analysis highlights how this exemplary short story uses allegory to present an allegory of the metatextual impasse that confronts its own procedures: "La configuración fundamental de la alegoría en cuanto relación entre imágenes, textos y lectura, se torna aporética ante el no-desciframiento de la personificación alegórica como un mensaje hipercodificado" (33). What is being represented if there are in play multiple allegorical codes offering multiple figures?

Rincón cautions that García Márquez's procedures here do not generate a Derridean "autodeconstrucción" of the very possibility of allegory, but instead an encounter between different allegorical codes: one popular that reads the figure as an angel; the other classical that determines him as Father Time (34, 36).[14] Thus, the short story superimposes its two allegorical figures to highlight the problem that arises when neither can be satisfactorily interpreted. Further, in a way consonant with the notion of postcolonial cultural-historical simultaneity, the story demonstrates how multiple registers of meaning and value coexist in the same representational space and so underlines the importance of cultural-historical context to the recovery of meaning (Rincón 36; Sangari 908). The locals in "Un señor muy viejo" simply have no context that would allow them to understand the old man as Father Time. All the same, and to considerable comic effect, their allegory of the angel fails to accommodate the appearance and behavior of the aged, winged man fallen into their midst. To date, Rincón's is the most sophisticated and ambitious interpretation of "Un señor muy viejo." With its emphasis on how allegory is used to register the simultaneous presence of different cultural registers of value and meaning, it is the reading that most closely aligns with the post-colonial perspective and doubled figuration of its marvelous protagonist that we find in *Dulce compañía*.

At the same time, Rincón's interpretation draws attention to an equally illuminating disjunction between the deliberately obscured forms of allegory used by García Márquez toward his metafictional ends and those used by Restrepo to extend legibility. Far from drawing on allegories destined to be unavailable or inchoate, Restrepo relies on established, legible, even commonplace, figures in her representation of the angel of Galilea and of the angelic scriptures. For example, the allusion of the title, and the collective touchstone for Restrepo's angel, is taken from the familiar children's prayer: "Ángel de mi guarda, dulce compañía, no me desampares ni de noche ni día" (19). This is a popular angel, a personal everyman's angel. As one local pilgrim puts it: "'No será san Miguel Arcángel, pero es nuestro ángel'" (65).

As in Rincón's reading of the short story, the novel presents two dominant, different yet overlapping, interpretations of its central figure as it negotiates between Bogotá and Galilea, between disenchanted skepticism and popular faith: he is a mentally afflicted victim of familial and societal abuse and neglect; he is a celestial agent sent for the relief and support of the abandoned and vulnerable. Each belongs to its respective world, its respective "cosmovision," and allegory is used in the representation of both. The identities, one facing toward the sacred and the other toward the social, overlap along the ground of the harsh reality lived by the angel and his community in Galilea. Thus, early on, Mona understands the fervency of the peoples' faith as an expression of their political, social, and economic dispossession. Discarded by the state and excluded by the Church, the people seek, and find, "el ángel de su guarda." Experience has shown them that "un ángel era un poder más con-

creto, accesible y confiable que un juez, un policía o un senador, ni qué hablar de un presidente de la república" (63). Translating the figure from the spiritual to the socio-political register of meanings and values, Mona herself allegorizes the angel of Galilea as an avatar of the forsaken.

Trying to track the angel's historical biography, Mona visits a penitentiary for the insane through which he is rumored to have passed. When she tries to identify to two guards the person she seeks, one guard speculates that she is referring to "El Mudo," but the other dismisses this, pointing out that all the inmates are deaf, dumb, and mentally impaired: "Aquí se vuelven así" (160). Mona remarks sardonically that the place, then, must be a veritable "fábrica de ángeles" (160). This comment participates in the same kind of irony Mona uses earlier in her characterization of the parade of pilgrims, many crippled and infirm, who have traveled from the barrio Paraíso to seek miracles in Galilea: "Una auténtica corte de los milagros, arropada con la pobreza deforme y sin atenuantes de la tierra fría" (61). There is a depreciative irony packed ready-made in the appellations "Galilea," "Paraíso," "corte de milagros," and "fábrica de ángeles" which would draw on the loftiness of their figurative connotation to underscore the debasement of their literal incarnation as communities of the wretched and dispossessed. But while Mona's witticisms acknowledge this irony, they deflate the distance convention would maintain between the elevated and the abject. Her redoubled ironies ultimately assert a congruency between the "elevated" and the "abject," and so become legible as a kind of socio-political allegory: the living faith of the oppressed is a true miracle; the messengers who bring us the most profound, potentially transformative, truths of the world are those who have been mutilated and silenced. According to Mona's figure, the angel of flesh and blood personifies the suffering and the desire for deliverance of a people whose experience and desires would be muted and erased by prevailing political, military, socio-economic, and cultural forces.

Through her investigations, Mona establishes that the angel of Galilea is a likely victim of multiple forms of violence: human trafficking, displacement, incarceration, torture, exploitation by guerrilla forces, and, finally, disappearance. The trauma is written on his scarred body and mind; it registers as drug addiction, aphasia, amnesia, severe withdrawal, even psychosis. He, then, indeed presents a kind of personification of what historian Gonzalo Sánchez analyzes as "la multiplicidad de violencias" loosed in Colombia in the 1980s and 1990s. So, while Mona's figurative ironies may be rhetorically accomplished, they are fully legible within a realistic, socio-political register of meaning and value that shapes her, the text's, and Colombia's own consciousness.

The figuration of the angel of Galilea, the angel of flesh and blood, as a divine being with celestial origins and affiliations, rather than a mutilated and mute, fully human member of the underclass, takes place in two registers of narration. First, Mona's narrative witnesses, in reported speech and interior monologue, the ecstatic, transcendent experiences his followers and she herself have with him. She reports on the popular ceremonies organized around the cult of the angel: his ritual exhibition in an underground grotto; the parade of miracle seeking pilgrims; and, finally, a carnivalesque ceremony in which she and the angel are paraded together through the streets before their sacred-erotic union (40-44; 60-66; 92-97). The rhetorical patterning of Mona's account of this union echoes that of a simple, if heterodox, prayer: "Santa mi alma y santo mi cuerpo, bienamados y gozosamente aceptados los dos. Santa la maternidad y también santa la sexualidad... santo placer, bendito orgasmo, porque ellos son limpios, y puros, y santos, y de ellos serán el cielo y la tierra... Bendito sea por siempre el pecado de la carne, si se comete con tantas ganas y con tanto amor (96). Like the angel himself, Mona's experience here is at once corporeal and transcendent. Like the angel himself, it is at once unorthodox and, from a discursive perspective, completely conventional.

Next, and, from this discursive perspective, most significantly, the celestial, transcendent figuration of the angel takes place through the fragments of angelic discourses that accompany each chapter except the last. In heavily allegorical language, these express six distinct angelic consciousnesses, each with a scriptural name, except for the second who pronounces himself "el Ángel sin Nombre" (75). The passages are taken by Mona from the notebooks of mystically transcribed voices that, over the course of years, have visited the Galilean woman Ara. As in traditional accounts of allegorical visions, Ara's angelic voices speak through her while she is in an altered state, in a trance (50). She is not the author, but the scribe of writings whose origin and purport mystify her until the leader of the angelic junta, Crucifija, provides an explanation: these are, and always have been, even before his appearance in Galilea, the dictations of the angel of Galilea. Further, this angel of flesh and blood, this mute, damaged, and enigmatic youth, is none other than Ara's own disappeared son. Taken from her as an infant, after sixteen years he has returned home as an angel (49-51). The homegrown cult of the angel of Galilea has created its own sacred history, complete with texts, and the beginnings of a theology. In essence, this popular, spiritual creativity is "lo maravilloso" which Restrepo preserves and communicates in the novel.[15]

When Mona first confronts this history and these texts she is incredulous: "¿De dónde saldrían, en realidad de verdad, estos cuadernos increíbles, demasiado simples para ser dictados por un ángel, pero absolutamente improbables para ser escritos por gente pobre de barrio analfabeta?" (57). The origin of these writings is incredible and their connection to the flesh and blood angel of Galilea is unstable. While no one in the community doubts the divine nature of the angel of Galilea, there is no evidence beyond maternal recognition that he is the same being as the infant son taken from Ara years before; nor is there any evidence beyond Crucifija's conjecture that he is the locus of consciousness of the multiple voices produced in Ara's notebooks. None of it really adds up. Mona's reasonable doubts trace the uncertainties that obscure origin and authorship: "¿Quién habría escrito de verdad aquello? Si la autora era Ara, había

que admitir una de tres posibilidades, o recibía la inspiración de otro ser u otro lado, o poseía una personalidad más compleja de la que cabía suponer, o simplemente copiaba la cosa de alguna parte" (57). Mona concludes that the least rationally convincing, yet most imaginatively seductive, hypothesis is Crucifija's and Ara's own: the notebooks are the mystical, visionary dictations of the angel of Galilea who is Ara's disappeared son. Ingeniously weaving together three mysteries—the fate of Ara's disappeared infant, the provenance of the voices she transcribes in her notebook, and the identity of the youth who has appeared out of nowhere—in a narrative where each explains the other, this story makes the most sense, though the sense it makes is fabulous. Mona ends these reflections not by simply leaving the question open, but by doing so in a manner that "projects" it onto a different level of significance, that of an authentic mystery unreachable through the empirical reason with which she has examined the matter: "Fueran lo que fueran, de procedencia humana o divina, originales o apócrifos, estos cuadernos significaban una revelación y un auténtico misterio" (57-58).

Thus the nature and origin of both the angel of Galilea and the notebooks of Ara are thoughtfully investigated in Mona's narrative and both defined as unknowable, unverifiable in conventional epistemological terms. Yet far from unrepresentable, this "auténtico misterio" is given fully realized discursive form in the novel through the production of these, its most figuratively dense and distinctive, passages of angelic scripture. And, although "unknowable" in conventional terms, and represented in esoteric and allegorical forms, the mystery is by no means illegible. For while it certainly does seem improbable that these notebooks, with their recondite allusions, cosmic allegories, and elevated diction, were written by anyone from Galilea, they have been read and understood (after their different fashions), not only by educated outsiders Mona and Padre Benito, but also by members of the community, by Ara and Crucifija, of course, yet even by the boy Orlando. Thus, the novel posits for these characters access to a cultural, discursive context of popular religious belief that renders the texts generally comprehensible. It is reasonable to assume that most readers also would have access to this or overlapping contexts of sacred writings, legends, and beliefs. So, whether one celebrates them as a stylistic *tour de force*, or bemoans them as cheesy pastiche, whether one attempts to trace their figures and allusions in sacred canon and apocrypha, or simply savors their grandiosity, these angelic passages are perfectly legible as Mystical Discourse. If they seem opaque and over-the-top, that can be understood as an intended effect: Mystical Discourse is properly resplendent and at least superficially enigmatic.

These texts accompany Mona's narrative which, in its turn, guides their interpretation, providing much of the context for their enhanced legibility. Albeit in a rhetorical register amplified by mystical allegory, the angelic fragments contain references to Mona herself and to the events she records in her narrative. For example, the fourth angelic passage, "Mermeoth, o la furia del ángel," describes as one grand celestial paroxysm the electrical storm recorded in Mona's narrative as two unrelated events, an epileptic episode suffered by the angel of Galilea and a torrential downpour. Within mystical discourse, these events are compounded and magnified as an allegory of a cosmic tempest where the corporeal torment of the angel, here the centaur-angel Mermeoth, merges with the turmoil unleashed on the earth: "Soy Mermeoth, cuerpo equino, cabeza de ángel albino.... Soy el océano, soy cada gota de lluvia y de llanto.... Soy Mermeoth y mis venas son ríos.... Con el vapor que sale de mis fosas empaño los ventanales del tiempo" (110). In the extravagant description of this experience, Mermeoth mentions several details that are readily recognizable as symptoms of an epileptic episode: the approach of an "aura"; intolerance of light; loss of control; muscular rigidity; delirium (110-112; Epilepsy Foundation). In a sense important to its immediate legibility, here the angelic allegory simply literalizes a conventional analogy between an epileptic episode and an electrical storm: "During a seizure, there are bursts of electrical activity in your brain, sort of like an electrical storm" (Epilepsy Foundation). What is figuratively understood as an analogy, and what Mona understands as two distinct events whose concurrence is accidental, the angelic discourse represents, and the faithful understand, as the paired expressions of the sacred force of Mermeoth. What Mona diagnoses as an epileptic fit, the local boy Orlando identifies as sacred possession: "no está enfermo, está poseído por Mermeoth" (108). What Mona sees as stormy weather, Orlando sees the earthly manifestation of a divine power: "Veo a Mermeoth, el ángel de la tempestad. Mermeoth es el que manda en todos los ríos, todos los mares, y hasta en las lágrimas y la lluvia, mejor dicho en todos los líquidos de la tierra. Así dice en los cuadernos de Ara" (107).

"Así dice en los cuadernos de Ara": Orlando, like the community in general, understands the angel of Galilea as a "real" angel, that is as a celestial, divine being; he reads the allegorical figuration of the notebooks as a fluent expression of the angel's true majesty and power. Through their often baroque and apocalyptic allegory, the angelic fragments supply the novel with a rhetorically appropriate representation of the marvelous, transcendent power attributed to the angel by popular belief. Discursively, as interior monologues, they supply a revelation of consciousness that stands as a counterpart to that in Mona's first-person narrative. Integral elements of a popular novel, these fragments conceive of the angel's authentic mystery in typically novelistic terms of an interior consciousness identified with his very being. The miracle is not anything remarkable that the angel of flesh and blood says or does, but what he *is,* and this mystery is revealed in internal monologue.

In an ethical, social register, the function of these notebooks is preservative: they protect the authentic mystery experienced in Galilea against "el virus borratiza" unleashed first by the police who raid the neighborhood and break up the cult, and then by the Church that tries to subsume all traces of the popular cult under its own gaudy, new Basilica of the Holy Angel (208).[16] Written texts, they are also preservatives against the ubiquitous frailty of memory

and stimulants of imaginative, figurative modes of representation and interpretation that elucidate the limits of conventional empirical, rational ways of perceiving and thinking.

The evanescence of the links that would bind the authorial consciousness of these discourses to the damaged, mute youth adopted as the angel of Galilea, maintains in abeyance the mystery of their origin and nature. The novel, then, establishes distance between the angel of Galilea and the multiplicity of angelic voices that speak through Ara's notebooks. Thus, the texts attain a kind of autonomy that facilitates their transcendence of the embodied, historical, and contingent, and so amplifies their horizon of significance. At the same time, this distance removes the flesh and blood angel from absolute, determining identification with these mystical discourses, and even from the primary narrative of the novel. The release of the angel from Mona's narrative and from Ara's notebooks is thematized in the novel by his flight, after the police crackdown, from Galilea. At this point, his story is picked up by other narratives where he surfaces in other guises. Beyond its traversal between the two coexistent, yet segregated, realities of modern Bogotá and the barrio of Galilea, the novel navigates a more variegated, less neatly bisected, terrain of allegorized transcendence where available images and legends are exploited and conflated in ways expressive of a range of socio-cultural experience and desire.

Angels proliferate around the edges of the narrative, extending their presence beyond the two central figurations of the angel of Galilea examined here, the celestial angel of the cult and the mute, damaged youth. First, there is a set of angels that Mona is compelled to investigate after her editor rejects the Galilea story on the grounds that no one wants to read about the superstitions of the poor (101). The superstitions of celebrities are literally another story; so, Mona is sent off to interview a film star, a senator, and a toreador about their angelic encounters (103-104). These more exclusive angels are those destined to appear under the headline for the week's lead story "¡Los ángeles llegan a Colombia!"(103) Pointedly, these stories displace, and so erase, that of the angel of Galilea. Just as emphatically, the headline announces the arrival of its angels from elsewhere, and so betrays the foreign, belated, impetus for the story, noted by Mona at the start of her novel.[17] While the celebrities Mona interviews are presumedly Colombian, the conformity their status and the magazine's headline establish between their angels and the foreign, fashionable angels coveted by the editor, retraces the socio-cultural frontier between modern, sophisticated Bogotá and backward, impoverished Galilea, between these angels of the rich and famous and the angel of the poor and disregarded people of Galilea.

This contrast heightens our appreciation of the popular authenticity of the angel of Galilea we encounter in Mona's narrative and in the angelic discourses. But in a gesture that disavows ultimate proprietorship over this figure and reaffirms the popular creativity of the faithful, in the last part of the novel, the angel of Galilea starts to appear outside Mona's narrative in increasingly marvelous, varied, and culturally evocative forms (195-198). During his sojourn in the wilderness after his flight from Galilea, the angel takes on features of popular cultural mythologies, "de Superman o Pablo Escobar," and then of Christ the miracle worker: "Por primera vez oí hablar de sus milagros: habría salvado a la población de Santa María de Arenales de una inundación, habría hecho caer maná del cielo sobre el pueblo famélico de Remolinos" (195-196). The angel as guardian of a deserving elite; the angel as superhero, champion of the underdog; the angel as sanctified outlaw, "el Robin Hood Colombiano"; the angel as Christ, working miracles for the salvation of the abandoned: each image figures a different way in which contemporary experiences and cultural forms imagine protection and transcendence ("Un ídolo en Colombia"). And to this list we must add the orthodox, blond angel of the new basilica built in Galilea in the Church's attempt to reassert its authority over popular faith. With this proliferation of angels, the novel expands its reference to different, coexistent allegorical codes well beyond the doubled figure of "Un señor muy viejo,"

Yet, this multiplicity of stories and images around the edges of the novel does not displace the novel's two central representations of the angel; rather, it serves as a foil that illuminates their form and function as discursive partners positioned side-by-side to generate a specifically novelistic oscillation between the realistic and the marvelous. So, even as it updates the marvelous in accordance with changing socio-political realities and aesthetic-ethical commitments, *Dulce compañía*, draws on established novelistic discourses of verisimilitude and reflexivity and so participates in the novel's ongoing recapitulation of extra-empirical phenomena and consciousness (Gallagher; McKeon 858). In a novelistic tradition that might be traced back to the "explained supernatural" of the gothic romances of Ann Radcliffe, *Dulce compañía* enacts a dialectic between the empirical and the marvelous that recuperatively preserves both the realm of the literary imagination and, more largely, that realm of historical possibility central to ethical social commitment (Castle ix; Sangari 903). It does this in a way that would update and preserve the marvelous, connecting it both to the cultural experience of a contemporary, urban community, and to the cultural marketplace of an unabashedly popular, commercial literature. As a novel, then, it is grounded in two coexistent, yet incongruent, forms of the popular: that of the more traditional, local, and culturally "authentic," and that of the more commercial, global, and culturally "compromised." Finally, then, this opens onto the question of the possibility of an equitable, preservative, and creative exchange across these cultural realms, and whether, with its motif of cross-categorical pairing, *Dulce compañía* offers conceptual tools for its achievement.

NOTES

[1] Susana Reisz sets *Dulce compañía* alongside other popular Latin American novels by women: Isabel Allende, *La casa de los espíritus*, *De amor y de sombra* and *Eva Luna*; and Laura Esquivel, *Como agua para chocolate*. She notes that all share an "aire de familia con García Márquez" (333). Carmiña Navia notes in passing an echo between Ara's notebooks in *Dulce compañía* and Melquíades's parchments in *Cien años de soledad* (24). In a review, Deborah Cohn draws a direct connection between Restrepo's novel and "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings" which she reads as "an allegory of capitalism and religion gone wrong" (88).

[2] The same paragraph containing this phrase appears in entries for the novel on the major sites: *Dulce compañía,* Amazon.com; Goodreads.com; Book Depository.com; Lecturalia.com.

[3] Susan E. Carvalho groups Laura Restrepo together with other popular Latin American women writers, Isabel Allende, Angeles Mastretta, Sara Sefchovich and Rosario Ferré, who "reject the inaccessibility of the previous generation's novels" (11): "They do not question the nature of reality, nor do they believe it to be unintelligible" (12). This sets them apart from Boom novelists often typified by their "radical questioning of the nature of reality and literature's ability to describe it" (Swanson 85),

[4] Unconventional, flesh and blood angels figure as protagonists in modern Latin American fiction not only in "Un señor muy viejo," but also, for example, in "El ángel caído" by Mexican writer Amado Nervo and "El ángel pobre" by Nicaraguan writer Joaquín Pasos.

[5] Typical of late twentieth- and twentieth-first-century Latin American writers, in *Dulce compañía*, Restrepo uses a narrator closely allied with her own experience and perspective to provide a straight-forward, first-person account of contemporary lived experience (González 160-162). "Testimonios," first-person, non-fiction accounts that witness events and conditions of socio-political import, and the fictional "novela testimonial" are two prominent types of post-Boom first-person narratives (Shaw, *Companion* 166-169; *Post-Boom* 22-24; Swanson 92-93). Its context of endemic violence and socio-economic abandonment, and its concern with preserving the experience it narrates from erasure at the hands of dominant authorities, align *Dulce compañía* with the "novela testimonial."

[6] Probably García Márquez's most anthologized story, its presence extends beyond the confines of the academy and traditional literary culture. It features prominently, for example, in the community reading program, *Gente y Cuentos*/People and Stories, designed by Sarah Hirschman and run for over thirty years in the United States and Latin America (Schwartz 749-750).

[7] "By 1970 features such as fantasy, multiple narrative voices, and structural fragmentation had become the norm" (Swanson 84). Such a norm was well-established among the North American readership where Latin American fiction was equated with "illusion, metaphor, fantasy and mysticism" (McDowell; Franco 160-161).

[8] In his discussion of social segmentation in the novel, Samuel Jaramillo González emphasizes that the manifest presence of the marvelous in *Dulce compañía* makes inevitable a consideration of its relation to magic realism: "cómo no hacer alusión al 'realismo fantástico', a lo 'real maravilloso' que ha sido la enseña de la narrativa latinoamericana desde la generación del *Boom*" (150).

[9] This stereotyped image of Colombia persists even among literary scholars. For example, in her overview of Restrepo's work, Navia describes the novel's setting in terms that absolutely merge geographical location and literary mode, and so uncritically reproduce the conventional idea of nation that Restrepo's narrator interrogates: "este país real-maravilloso en el que habitamos y que nos habita . . .. el mundo maravilloso y fantástico" (23).

[10] Jean Franco remarks how this kind of "cultural incorporation" of the local by the international market was a negative effect of the popularity of "magical realism" (159).

[11] Translated into 20 languages, the novel has gained a wide international readership. Beyond Julie Lirot's and Elvira Sanchez-Blake's 2007 collection of essays on Restrepo's work, it has received little academic attention.

[12] Consonantly, as an author, Restrepo seeks to establish "intimidad con un desconocido por medio del libro" (Lirot 347).

[13] Rincón sees the contrast between the widespread currency of the story, especially in the classroom, and the scarcity of published academic work on it as evidence that its significance is taken as self-evident (13).

[14] As Sangari points out: "The conscious technical complexity of the texts does not ask to be read as an effect either of the autonomy of language, or text, or even as a gesture toward the auto-referentiality of art. Rather, the narratives gesture toward the autonomy of the story in its semantic aspect: stories exist above and beyond the storytellers" (905).

[15] Reflecting on her inspiration for *Dulce compañía,* Restrepo says the novel is an homage to the people who fulfill their own longings for transcendence and the sacred through communal and popular creativity (Melis 126).

[16] The angel of the basilica is conventionally winged, European, and blond; the angel of Galilea is emphatically "moreno" and wingless. As Mona remarks, this angel of the basilica "no es nuestro" (209).

[17] "Que el jefe de redacción quería un artículo sobre aparición de ángel, era sólo porque el tema acababa de pasar de moda en Estados Unidos" (17).

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