

Introduction

*R*eading Manuel Zapata Olivella's fictions, one is always aware of his emphasis on social justice and folklore. These two concerns come together rather neatly in his writing, because he grants them a considerable amplitude of meaning, thereby creating a richer field of connotation than would be likely if the terms were understood in a very specialized way.

In the early 1970s, Zapata Olivella was a visiting professor at my university. Since I was working on a book about the Spanish-American novel in the twentieth century, I asked for his advice regarding the novel in Colombia. In a series of conversations, he provided a very useful outline of what I needed to read, including dispassionate, though certainly not coldly objective, opinions. His remarks about social justice shared these qualities. In one especially memorable session, he must have detected some misunderstanding on my part, and said (I paraphrase, of course, switching languages and spanning almost twenty years), "Look, you should not equate social justice with happiness; social justice is not happiness, it is justice." And so it is, in his novels, with all its connotations of freedom, welfare, and opportunity, but not as the source of happiness.

He is interested in folklore because he desires to know the context in which he lives, in its most essential manifestation. In his narratives, the folkloric elements extend to include what is better described as "popular," rather than folkloric—popular, that is, in the sense that politicians mean it when they refer to "the people," and hence, the connection with social justice becomes apparent.

Zapata Olivella was born in 1920, in the town of Lorica, on the Caribbean coast of Colombia, to the south and west of Cartagena, in the di-

rection of Colombia's frontier with Panama. This is tropical country, rice-growing country that functions as the setting of his first novel, *Tierra mojada* (Wet Land, 1947). However, before this story became a book, the author had begun to investigate the world away from Lorica. He went to Bogotá and studied medicine, but his desire to identify himself in an even larger context initiated a series of journeys—sometimes on foot, and often by bus—that always took him back to Colombia. In 1943, he was in Mexico, and from there he proceeded to New York where he met *Ciro Alegría*, the Peruvian novelist, who became a consultant on Zapata's first novel.

Alegría recalls that the young writer presented himself as a journalist who had also written a novel. In later years, Zapata became preeminently a novelist, but the journalist's instinct never disappeared completely. His novels always communicate a sense of immediate concern. He was writing at a time when Colombian fiction seemed to move in two directions at once: an introspective, psychological, possibly existentialist novel, as exemplified by *Jaime Ibáñez*, on the one hand, and on the other, the intensely denunciatory, society-oriented, almost declamatory work of *José Antonio Osorio Lizarazo*. Zapata's novels are fully as society-oriented as *Osorio Lizarazo's*, but are considerably less declamatory. An outstanding characteristic of Zapata's work is the absent protagonist. It is very difficult to say that any one of his novels is about such-and-such a person. On the other hand, his characters are individuals; they do not lose their identities in a mass protagonist. Each one is recognizably a part of a context. This characteristic of his fiction makes one think of the author's quest for identity in terms of his knowledge of the world.

In 1960, *La calle 10* (Tenth Street) recalled and denounced the tragic assassination of the liberal leader *Jorge Eliécer Gaitán*. It portrays vividly the subsequent popular uprising. The novel is especially notable for its movement from focus on an individual to focus on the mass of people, then back to the individual. Zapata's prose is lean; his human concern communicates a simple tenderness that corresponds to the popular feel of the novel. As is often the case in his work, Zapata organizes the story of *La calle 10* in scenes that move readers rapidly from one place to another while developing the story line.

The popular sense of *La calle 10* becomes more folkloric in *En Chimá nace un santo* (A Saint Is Born in Chimá, 1964), partly because the author puts aside the urban environment of Bogotá, and for this novel returns to the Lorica region. Beyond this sociogeographical difference lies the very fundamental phenomenon of folk Catholicism. The story is

based on the popular sanctification of Domingo Vidal, a crippled boy who is miraculously saved when his family's home is destroyed by fire. The locale is a village close to Lorica, and it is in this relatively isolated settlement that the local sacristan becomes the leader of a heretical cult.

Zapata's narrative places this popular movement in opposition to ecclesiastical orthodoxy, which is based in the town of Lorica. The story is told in segments which, unlike some more experimental novels of the same period, maintain chronological order. The shifting between Chimá and Lorica enhances the dynamic quality of the story and also emphasizes the conflict between heresy and orthodoxy. One effect of this development in contrast is to portray the two sides as equally fanatical. Here again we find the emphasis on social justice. The superstitions of the people of Chimá appear folkloric, but they seem no less reasonable than the faith of the orthodox. As for the miracles, which are credited to the saintliness of Domingo Vidal, each and every one has a possible rational explanation, but such explanations are not what the popularly declared saint's adherents are looking for.

A Saint Is Born in Chimá is an interesting, unusual story that can be enjoyed with no reference to any other literary work. However, several of its characteristics can be related to other fictions in ways that enhance the pleasure and importance of Zapata's novel. It appeared in the mid-1960s when the "boom" in Latin American fiction was in its early phase, and the Latin American "new novel" (a combination of regionalistic material with a cosmopolitan viewpoint) was well established. Almost without critical recognition, the Colombian novel was entering its Golden Age. Gabriel García Márquez had published *La hojarasca* (*Leafstorm*) in 1955, and his *El coronel no tiene quien le escriba* (*No One Writes to the Colonel*) appeared in 1961. *Cien años de soledad* (*One Hundred Years of Solitude*) first captivated readers in 1967. During the period from 1960 to 1967, important novels by Colombians Manuel Mejía Vallejo, Eduardo Caballero Calderón, Humberto Navarro, Alvaro Cepeda Zamudio, Héctor Rojas Herazo, and Fanny Buitrago, among others, established Colombian fiction solidly within the new wave. Other Latin American writers like Julio Cortázar, Carlos Fuentes, Mario Vargas Llosa, Juan Carlos Onetti, and José Donoso were becoming internationally known.

Domingo Vidal, the "saint" of *A Saint Is Born in Chimá*, is an almost absent protagonist and, for that reason, brings to mind some Latin American novels in which a dictator, that widely recognized political phenomenon, functions as protagonist, but hardly ever appears on the scene. The motivating factor is not so much the physical presence of the dictator as it is his influence, or one might say, the myth of dictatorial

power. Readers may recall Miguel Angel Asturias' *El Señor Presidente*, where the dictator appears only briefly, even though the awareness of his ruthless power terrorizes the populace. Or one remembers García Márquez's *El otoño del patriarca* (*The Autumn of the Patriarch*), where the dictator lives, effectively, past the point of death. So it is with Domingo Vidal. Because he is severely handicapped physically, his actions cannot be a major factor in the narrative, and even after his death, the cult that has grown up around him sustains his importance as a motivating force and central concern of the narrative.

One could hardly say that *A Saint Is Born in Chimá* tells the story of Domingo Vidal; rather, it is the story of a heresy. It is tempting to single out the sacristan, Jeremías, as protagonist. He is the promoter of the cult's activity and becomes known as the "prophet." However, the movement itself becomes much larger than he is, and in this respect, he resembles Vargas Llosa's prophet in *La guerra del fin del mundo* (*The War of the End of the World*), with the important and interesting difference that Zapata's story is confined to a small region, while the Brazilian situation, in Vargas Llosa's novel, acquires national importance.

The "miracles" in *A Saint Is Born in Chimá*, on one level of understanding, seem related to a phenomenon that has stereotyped Latin American fiction, called "magic realism" or "marvelous reality," or simply "fantasy," depending on the characteristics of the case as well as on the speaker's definition of the terms. There is an important difference in Zapata's novel, in that the narrative makes all the "miracles" naturally explainable even though they may be considered most extraordinary. Therefore, a reader's understanding may vary according to one's own preference. With respect to the supernatural, *A Saint Is Born in Chimá* probably resembles Alejo Carpentier's *El reino de este mundo* (*The Kingdom of This World*) more closely than any of the other "magical" Latin American novels. Faith in an absent person is the key to this similarity in spirit; it works in combination with events that move readers to say "only in Latin America. . . ."

Zapata Olivella by no means rejects the popular reality of Chimá's miracles; he looks at them in the perspective of what he knows through study and experience, just as he has defined himself within his context. In those conversations mainly about the Colombian novel, years ago, he sometimes talked of negritude and said that the black experience in the United States was entirely different from the black experience in Colombia. His pondering this matter eventually took him to Africa (inveterate traveler that he is) and produced his most substantial literary work since *A Saint Is Born in Chimá*. *Changó, el gran putas* (Changó, the big

mother . . .), published in 1983, is a novel based on the Black Diaspora. The novelist takes his readers back to a primary condition of respected blackness, before it became necessary to speak of the black experience with some kind of modifier. One of Zapata's critics, Roberto Herrera Soto, has written, "The curse of Changó fell upon those who rebelled against the ideal order and was projected onto the mass of those who, as prisoners, left Africa against their will" (*La República Dominicana*, No. 329, 1 March 1984, p. 2). Zapata's search for understanding his context has expanded far beyond Lorica and Chimá, but an important branch of his extensive roots is firmly grounded in the Caribbean coast of Colombia.

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A Saint Is Born in Chimá

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