

Damocles' Cataclysm

Gabriel García Márquez

A minute after the last explosion, more than half of all human beings will have died, the dust and smoke of the burning continents will vanquish the light of the sun, and absolute darkness will reign in the world. A winter of orange rains and freezing hurricanes will invert the time of the oceans and turn the courses of the rivers upside down, the fish will have died of thirst in the burning waters and the birds will not find the sky. Perpetual snow will cover the Sahara Desert, the vast Amazon will disappear from the face of the planet, destroyed by hail, and the age of Rock and heart transplants will return to its glacial infancy. Those few human beings who survive the first terror, and those who had the privilege of a safe refuge at 3 o'clock in the afternoon of that unlucky Monday of the grand catastrophe, will have saved their lives only to die later from the horror of their memories. Creation will have ended. In the final chaos of the dampness and the eternal nights, the cockroaches will be the only remains of what was life.

Mister Presidents, Mister Prime Ministers, ladies and gentlemen, friends: this is not a poor plagiarism of John's delirium in the exile of Patmos, but the anticipated vision of a cosmic disaster which could happen this very instant: the explosion - on purpose or by accident - of only a minimal part of the nuclear arsenal which sleeps with one eye open in the military storerooms of the super-powers.

That's the way things are. Today, August 6, 1986, there are more than 50,000 nuclear warheads deployed. In domestic terms, this means that every human being, including every child, is sitting on a barrel of several kilos of dynamite -- the explosion of which could eliminate twice over every sign of life on Earth. The potential annihilation posed by this colossal threat, which hangs over our heads like a cataclysm of Damocles, suggests the theoretical possibility of putting out of action four more planets of those which revolve around the Sun, and of destabilizing the equilibrium of the solar system. No science, no art, no industry has doubled itself so many times as the nuclear industry has done since it began forty years ago, nor has any other creation of the human genius ever held so much power over the world's destiny.

The only consolation in these terrific simplifications, if it's worth anything, is to prove that the preservation of human life on Earth is still cheaper than the nuclear plague. Just with their simple existence, the silos of death in the richer nations with their tremendous captive apocalypse, are squandering the possibilities of a better life for all.

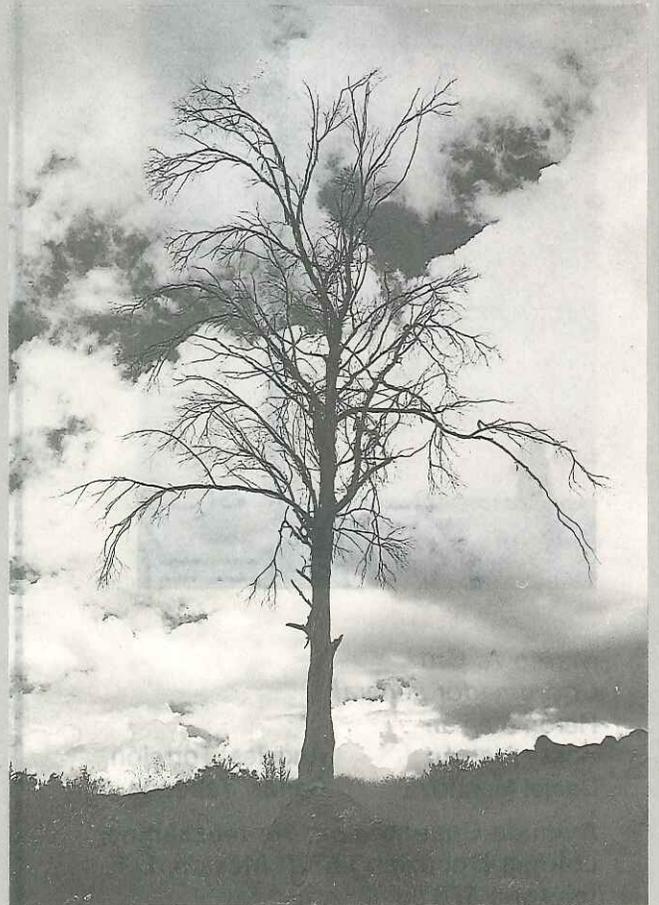
In infant welfare, for example, this is a truth of primary arithmetic. Back in 1981, the UNICEF proposed a plan to resolve the essential problems of the poorest 500 million children in the world. It included basic sanitary aid, elemental education, improvement of hygienic conditions, supply of drinking water and food. All this seemed an impossible dream with a cost of 100 billion dollars. However, this is the cost of only 100 strategic bombers B-1B, and of less than 7,000 Cruise missiles, in the production of which the U.S. government is to spend 21.2 billion dollars.

In health, for example, with the cost of 10 Nimitz nuclear aircraft carriers, of the 15 that the U.S. plans to build before the year 2000,

a prevention program could be carried out in the space of those same 14 years, protecting more than a billion people against malaria, and avoiding the deaths, just in Africa, of more than 14 million children.

In food, for example, according to the FAO, in 1985 there were 575 million hungry people in the world. Their indispensable average calory intake would have cost less than 149 MX missiles of the 223 deployed in Western Europe. Twenty-seven of them could have bought the agricultural equipment necessary so that poor countries could achieve self sufficiency in their food supplies within four years. Besides, this program would not cost even the ninth part of the Soviet Union's 1982 military budget.

In education, for example, with just two Trident atomic submarines, of the 25 that the current U.S. government plans to build, or with a similar number of Typhon submarines that the U.S.S.R. is constructing, the fantasy of world wide literacy could be attempted. Meanwhile, the construction of schools and the training of teachers needed in the third world to attend additional education



What will come first, ecological disaster or nuclear catastrophe?

Photo by Manuel Novoa.

demands, could be paid for with the cost of 245 Trident missiles, and there would still remain another 419 missiles for the same increase in education over the next 15 years.

Finally, we venture to say that the cancellation of the third world's foreign debt, and its economic recuperation over ten years, would cost a little more than one sixth of the world's military spending during the same period. But with all this monstrous economic squandering, the waste of human resources is even more disturbing and painful: the war industry holds captive the biggest group of knowledgeable persons ever united in any enterprise in the history of humankind. Their liberation is indispensable so that they help us to create, in the fields of education and justice, the only way of salvation from barbarity: a culture of peace.

In spite of these dramatic certainties, the arms race gives no respite. At this very moment, a new nuclear warhead is being built. Tomorrow when we wake up, there will be nine more in the storehouses of death in the hemisphere of the rich. The cost of just one of them would be enough to perfume the Niagara Falls with sandalwood, even if it were just for one Sunday in autumn. A great novelist of our times once asked himself if the Earth is not the Hell of the other planets. Perhaps it is much less than that - a hamlet without memory, fallen from the hand of its gods in the last suburb of the great universal motherland. But there is an increasing suspicion that this is the only place in the solar system where the prodigious adventure of life has taken place, and this leads us mercilessly to a disheartening conclusion: the arms race goes in opposite direction to intelligence. And it goes not only against human intelligence, but also against that of Nature - whose finality even escapes the clear-sightedness of the poets. Since the appearance of visible life on Earth, 380 million years had to go by for a butterfly to learn the joys of flight, and another 180 million years for the creation of a rose with no other commitment than being beautiful, and four geological eras for human beings, in contrast with their pithecanthropus ancestors, to be able to sing better than the birds and to die of love. It is no credit to human talent, in the Golden Age of Science, that it has conceived the way in which such a costly and colossal multi-millenary process can be sent back to the Nothing where it originated by the simple art of pressing a button.

We are here to try and prevent that happening, adding our voices to the innumerable calls for a world without weapons and for peace with justice. But even if this occurs, and more so if it does, our meeting here will not be completely useless. Within millions of millions of millenniums after the explosion, a triumphant salamander which will have travelled once again the entire scale of the species, will perhaps be crowned as the most beautiful woman of the new creation. It depends on us, men and women of science, of the arts and literature, of intelligence and peace, it depends on all of us that those who are invited to that chimerical coronation don't go to the party with the same fears we have today. With all modesty, but also with all determination of spirit, I propose here and now that we make a promise to conceive and fabricate an ark of memory, able to survive the atomic flood. A bottle of astral wrecks thrown into the oceans of time, so that the new humanity knows from us what the cockroaches won't tell - that here, life existed, that suffering prevailed and injustice dominated, but also that we knew love and we were able to imagine happiness. And so that they know and make known for all time who were those responsible for our disaster, and how deaf they were to our demands for peace so that this life might be the best of all possible lives, and with what barbarous inventions and for what mean and stingy interests they eliminated life from the universe. ■