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Pop Goes the Boom: *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and the Latin American New Novel

Philip Swanson

There is a scene in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* in which a bookseller and bibliophile known as "the wise Catalonian" advises an aspiring writer called Gabriel (the great grandson of Gerineldo Márquez) to leave Macondo, prompting the young man eventually to up sticks and move to Paris, France (García Marquez 1978, 322, 325). In some ways, this episode encapsulates the position of Gabriel García Marquez and his 1967 masterpiece in relation to the Latin American Boom that projected the literature of the subcontinent on to the international stage. García Márquez did, of course, live in Europe as well as Latin America (notably Paris and Barcelona) and it can be argued that the Latin American Boom actually took place in Europe (at least partially) and more specifically in the Catalonian capital Barcelona, where Catalan agents, publishers and literati promoted the so-called New Narrative. "Latin American Literature" as a notion had little international currency before the 1960s, even within the subcontinent itself. The projection of a "Latin American" (as opposed to, say, Colombian, Mexican or Argentinean) culture seems very much bound up with certain international perceptions of the region in the 1960s. As Gerald Martin wrote some thirty years ago, "it is no exaggeration to state that if the Southern continent was known for two things above all others in the 1960s, these were, first and foremost, the Cuban Revolution and its impact both on Latin America and the Third World generally, and secondly, the boom in Latin American fiction" (Martin 1984, 53). What follows from this is the idea that the very notion of a "Latin American Literature" is an invention, or at least an imaginary cultural phenomenon, which owes much to the global promotion of (specifically) the New Latin American *Novel* in the 1960s on the back of a faddish "First-World"

fascination with the perceived implications of the Cuban scene and the glamour of an exotic yet conveniently distant Leftism.

The rise of the New Novel (or “nueva novela”) up to and including the Boom of the 1960s and beyond is conventionally explained in literary terms as a function of a philosophical and aesthetic evolution: essentially the idea that the New Narrative is a reaction against the underlying assumptions of a presumed notion of traditional realism. In this version, the modern Latin American novel adopts a wilfully complex, fragmented or fantastic form in order to express a more fluid, problematic or even chaotic view of reality, reflected in a style of writing which is disorientating, problematic or even indecipherable. However, “literary” developments do not take place in a social, historical, cultural or political vacuum, and the “event” of the New Novel needs to be understood in context and as a result, in part at least, of some very specific and, in a sense, contingent circumstances (to do with contemporary geopolitics and the personal, ideological and business interests influencing cultural production and dissemination at the time). The very term “Boom” suggests that the triumph of the New Narrative is a commercial, publishing or marketing phenomenon as much as it is a manifestation of some kind of “natural” or organic literary-intellectual process - albeit a genuinely exciting happening, which provoked an enthusiastic following and a real sense of a Latin American “moment” having arrived. Moreover, the fact that the Boom – notwithstanding the frenzy of denial in many contemporary cultural critics - effectively takes place in Barcelona rather than in any Latin American metropolis alerts us to the possibility that it may at some level be a creation of European, Spanish or even specifically Catalonian cultural conditions.

The award of Barcelona publishing house Seix Barral's Biblioteca Breve Prize to Mario Vargas Llosa's *The Time of the Hero* in 1962 is the real moment of the Boom's inception. The Spain of the 1960s was a receptive space for vicariously subversive Spanish-language fiction at a time when Francoism had strangled much of the potential of homegrown narrative (a scathing anti-military allegory like Vargas Llosa's novel set in Spain rather than Peru would never have made it past the censors). There is even suspicion of a Catalan conspiracy to promote the Latin American novel at the expense of the Spanish novel. The Chilean novelist José Donoso points out that the jury which gave five prizes out of ten to Latin American writers was composed of a majority of individuals whose first language was Catalan, while the remaining minority consisted of two Latin Americans and only one Spaniard. He interprets this putative Catalan "plot" in the following way: "the Catalan members of the Biblioteca Breve Prize intended to destroy the Spanish novel by awarding one prize after another to Latin American novels written, at times, in rather curious variants of Spanish in order to eliminate definitively the tyranny of the Spanish language of Valladolid and of the novels written in that despised language" (Donoso 1977, 109).

In the Iberian context, the publicity machine of poet, publisher and "wise Catalonian" Carlos Barral and his allies (using too the famous Hotel Formentor in Mallorca as a frequent base for an internationalizing strategy) represented an expression of progressive and, frankly, progressively entrepreneurial resistance to a sense of Francoist inward-looking isolationism associated with Madrid's grip on the national cultural scene (not to mention the fact that Latin America itself would soon become a significant and lucrative market for books published from Spain). So, in a sense the "newness" of the New Novel became bound up with the foreign or at least the non-Castilian. Moreover, that link between novelty and

cosmopolitanism was expanded further via the promotion of the New Narrative in the USA (through translations, publicity, cultural events, increasing University activity and a series of semi state-sponsored programs and initiatives). The detail of all this has already been well captured, though the authoritative work of Diana Sorensen and Deborah Cohn stands out (Sorensen 2007; Cohn 2012). The interesting thing here, though, is how the foreignizing impulse is in tension with prevalent readings of García Márquez's work and the perceived brand of Magical Realism that is so often associated with him.

The common view is that what García Márquez achieves in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is to give voice to or even privilege a "Third-World" rural, oral and Latin American perspective of reality within the framework of a written novel form steeped in European or, later, North American tradition. The stylistic essence of Magical Realism, then, is to remind us that perceptions of reality are based on cultural assumptions and relative positions of cultural authority, so that, in Macondo, a young girl ascending into Heaven, a priest levitating after drinking a cup of hot chocolate or a rain of yellow butterflies are presented as perfectly natural, while phenomena such as ice, magnets, phonographs and trains are presented as unimaginably bizarre. Indeed from the outset, the novel appears to invite the reader to read reality in a way that transcends "First-World" rationalism. In the opening chapter, the founding father of Macondo, José Arcadio Buendía, teaches his children to read and think: "In the small separate room, where the walls were gradually being covered by strange maps and fabulous drawings, he taught them to read and write and do sums, and he spoke of to them about the wonders of the world ['las maravillas del mundo'], not only where his learning had extended, but forcing the limits of his [or 'their' as it could equally be translated from the original Spanish] imagination to extremes" (García Márquez 1978, 20).

This appears to be an invitation to the reader to read creatively rather than strictly rationally. The pleasure of the text relies to a large degree on the willingness to read in this way, so that the world is experienced through the eyes of a popular community. Yet surely the implied or ideal reader in this model is implicitly posited as educated or "First-World". When José Arcadio introduces his children (by extension, here, the implied reader) to "an enormous, transparent block with infinite internal needles in which the light of the sunset was broken up into coloured stars", "the largest diamond in the world", "the great invention of our time" (García Márquez 1978, 22), the reader (like the implied narrator or implied author) knows perfectly well that it is only a cube of ice. There is an uncomfortable complicity here between knowing reader and narrator or even author that offsets the valorization of a folk perspective which comes across as comically ignorant. Moreover, despite the much-touted orality of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (rooted in García Márquez's childhood home of Aracataca and the verbal storytelling favoured in his family background), the text is full of relatively recondite literary games and in-jokes aimed, presumably, at a connoisseur of the Latin American New Novel. Macondo is an echo of Juan Rulfo's Comala and Juan Carlos Onetti's Santa María. José Arcadio stumbles across the ghost ship of Víctor Hugues – a historical figure but also one of the protagonists of Alejo Carpentier's *Explosion in a Cathedral* (1962). One of the labor union activists leading the strike against the banana company is an exiled Mexican revolutionary who is said to have witnessed the exploits of Artemio Cruz, the title character from Carlos Fuentes' *The Death of Artemio Cruz* (1962). Gabriel's grotty Parisian hotel room is the place where Rocamadour will die (Rocamadour being a baby who meets its end in such a place in Julio Cortázar's *Hopscotch* [1963]). And, of course, in the ice scene, the one character who knows that the extraordinary object is just ice is the arch outsider Melquíades. Melquíades' parchments

haunt the pages of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Written in Sanskrit, verse and secret code, they are bafflingly opaque, and perhaps emblematic of the High Modernism that would be well beyond the ken of the townsfolk of Macondo. When, after a century of failed attempts, a *macondino* does manage to decipher the manuscripts, it is only to discover that he is no more than a character in somebody else's narrative and that his existence will end with the last line of the narrative that the real-world reader is consuming. However, García Márquez is the true author of the tale being told (not the equally fictional Melquíades) and the ending, like the implied suggestion near the beginning on how to read the text, situates him and his apparently projected ideal reader outside of the limited world of Macondo and in the realm of international high culture.

This is, it has to be said, an exaggerated position. While it is a valid and, maybe, for some, unavoidable, conclusion that *One Hundred Years of Solitude* very much fits in with the New Narrative's endemic sense of the unknowability of reality and literature's inevitable inability to capture reality, there can be no doubt that this is also a novel that is rooted in Latin American history and "real" experience. Indeed, the wise Catalonian's exhortation that Gabriel and his friends leave behind Macondo and a "marvellous sense of unreality" (García Márquez 1978, 325), could actually be interpreted as a plea to abandon magical, mythical or illusory versions of Latin America (to reject the unreality of much of the New Narrative as well as pernicious official versions of history) and see the truth. Thus the invitation to read with the "imagination" is also an incitement to imagine an independently achieved identity rather than one that is written by those enshrined with the power of cultural legitimacy. This would pave the way for Martin's ingenious reading of the denouement as an expression

of a proletarian sense of Revolution that argues for the subversion of myth by reality (Martin 1987).

The "Realism" of Magical Realism, though, links to another problematic aspect of the relationship between *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and the Boom of the New Novel. In the latter part of the twentieth century, the New Narrative came to be associated, for many, with a kind of Eurocentric elitism (increasingly associated with a hostility towards cultural icons like Jorge Luis Borges and Mario Vargas Llosa, who were often dismissed as right-wing in a way that also seemed to overshadow any value in their written work). There was a growing air of disapproval amongst many cultural critics – which has come close to becoming something of a new orthodoxy - about the way the Latin American novel appeared to be being judged according to how it played catch-up with European or Anglo-American Modernism. However, García Márquez was largely exempt from such criticisms, in part because of his journalistic writings and his (socio)political pronouncements, activities and associations (as well as the selective manner in which many critics chose to read his works). Nonetheless, the interpretation of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* offered here does posit a degree of identification with literariness and what is so often derisively reduced to Eurocentrism. It is interesting to note too that the novel that García Márquez long claimed to be his best, *The Autumn of the Patriarch* (1975), is probably his least accessible work and a bravura display of literary experimentalism. It is not surprising, then, that *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, coming at the end of the decade of the 1960s, is routinely seen as representing the pinnacle of the New Narrative and perhaps the climax of the Boom.

The problem is that *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is not really a very typical Boom novel. It may employ fantasy and play with the notion of reality, but it lacks the radical

structural fragmentation or near impenetrability of many examples. Even the heralded obsession with cyclical time that so many critics saw as central to the New Narrative is, as Edwin Williamson once hinted (Williamson 1987), a somewhat misleading presence here. Characters like Ursula may well repeatedly talk about circularity, but the narrative itself (notwithstanding its flashbacks and flashforwards) is essentially linear and evolves in a manner that is pretty much readily accessible to the reader. Appearing at the peak of the Boom, One *Hundred Years of Solitude* is more of a liminal or pivotal work, spanning the gap between the Boom and what came to be known as the Post-Boom. Returning to Catalonia, if Seix Barral was the main organ in the internationalization of the Latin American New Novel, it was the split within it (rumoured by some to have been prompted by anxiety over Catalan-centrism) which scuppered the famous prize around 1970 and, together with the notorious Padilla affair in Cuba in 1971, effectively marked the end of the Boom (Donoso 1977, 108-09). In any case, by the late 1960s and early 1970s, the new Novel was not that "new" any more. A rather different form of fiction, now linked with figures like Manuel Puig, was emerging, and, soon, established writers like Donoso, Fuentes and Vargas Llosa would start writing in a much-changed tone. Basically (and simplifying), there was a break with extreme complexity and exhausted experimentation and a turn to a more modest and digestible approach, that nonetheless retains and reformulates certain aspects of the problematizing thrust of the Boom – and so critics began to talk of a Post-Boom as a category (see, for example, Swanson 2005, 82-103). The readability and the sheer popularity of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (it was, as is well known, a staggering commercial success) links it to this trend – even if no one was really talking seriously about a Post-Boom in 1967.

So, García Marquez's great novel has a foot in both the camp of the Boom and, to some degree, that of the coming Post-Boom. Hence the significance of its influence on subsequent generations of writers and its role in unleashing, for better or for worse, a global cult of Magical Realism. Abroad, the legacy of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* in such varied commercially successful yet critically acclaimed authors like Salman Rushdie, John Irving, Toni Morrison, Ben Okri, Arundhati Roy or Patrick Süskind is obvious. In the Latin American context, the most notorious follower was Isabel Allende, particularly in the form of her own bestseller, *The House of the Spirits*. Allende's 1982 Post-Boom hit was widely seen as a populist and dumbed-down imitation of García Márquez's great Boom classic (sometimes seen too as responsible for the growth of a so-called "literatura light" of repetitive faux or sub Magical Realism). Like García Márquez's novel, Allende's uses a Magical Realist style to offer a sweeping historical portrait via an account of the lives of several generations of a single family, but unlike its predecessor, it focuses unambiguously (if indirectly) on a specific historical reality - the overthrow in Chile of Salvador Allende by the Pinochet coup of 1973 and the gruesome aftermath. The narrative structure meantime actually appears, about halfway through (with the death of the spiritist Clara who has magical powers), to subvert the magical element and turn it into a form of harsh realism (with chapter titles like "The Awakening" and "The Hour of Truth"). Alba, who is brutally raped and tortured, retires to work on her dead grandmother Clara's notebooks, as did various Buendías with Melquíades' papers. Yet Clara's scripts are notably different to Melquíades's. While the latter's are obscure and appallingly difficult to decipher, hers, though non-chronological, are amenable to interpretation and able to be ordered and rendered useful. In fact, in what looks like a poke at the elaborate fantasy and confusing repetitiveness of all the José Arcadios and Aurelianos in García Márquez , Clara "did not believe in repeating names, because it created

confusion in her notebooks that bore witness to life" (Allende 1983, 263). Alba (generally thought to represent, in part, Allende herself) is writing to preserve real events, "salvaging them from the mists of improbable facts" (Allende 1983, 246). It is difficult to avoid the impression here that Allende (despite her many expressions of artistic indebtedness to García Márquez) is engineering a near consciously Post-Boom (and also female) riposte to the exclusively white male elite that many of subsequent generations came to see as comprising the authors of the Boom.

This account may seem rather ungenerous to García Márquez. This is not the intention. The aim is to emphasize the iconicity and importance of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* in the development of an idea of "Latin America literature" alongside the more familiar evaluation of the text's internal merits. It may appear something of a caricature of the classic novel to situate it so precisely in the contexts that spawned it and that it went on to spawn itself. However, the inherent tensions in its relationship to the Boom and beyond should not be avoided. García Márquez's master work is optimistic and pessimistic; it reflects reality and problematizes the relationship between literature and reality; it deals in specificity and universality; it is deeply Latin Americanist and part of World Literature. García Márquez himself may well have been a public political figure, but *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is much more than that. *The House of the Spirits* may, in some respects at least, pack a more explicit and immediate political punch, with a more visceral effect on a mainstream audience. The politics of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is certainly provocative, but it is also its very ambiguity, multifacetedness and openness to interpretation that make it so rich as a piece of literature and that make it such a fundamental cornerstone of the Latin American New Novel and of the Boom.

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