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“Against (In)equality: Bad Latin American Literature”

The central concern of literature is not so much inequality, but difference. And so it should be. Literature enables an exploration of otherness, variety, and singularity. It does so by allowing readers to feel or sense other worlds, different from their own, thereby relativizing their own experience, such that they recognize that they, too, are different. Hence literature differs from film, at least as described by the Frankfurt School theorist Siegfried Kracauer: film often encourages its spectators to see themselves as the same, as part of a mass; but literature tends to emphasize either individualism or a much more diffuse sense of commonality.¹ Film constructs a mass audience of equals; literature posits a common readership characterized by diversity. Even critic Benedict Anderson’s famous argument about the role of the novel and novel-reading in the construction of nationalist sentiment stresses the range of sensations to which, for instance, picaresque narratives expose their readers: a “*tour d’horison*,” in the case of José Joaquín Fernández de Lizardi’s *El periquillo sarniento*, of “hospitals, prisons, remote villages, monasteries, Indians, Negros,” whose exemplary differences combine to constitute the collectivity that will be called Mexico.² In short, literature is more about imagination than calculation, experience than measurement, affect than effect.

Literary *criticism*, by contrast, is all too often preoccupied with issues of equality or inequality. Traditionally, this is registered in a discourse on value, for which some books are better than others in whatever way that “better” is to be defined. Indeed, literature properly speaking, in this traditional conception, is defined by the fact that it

¹ Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament*. Guy Debord subsequently develops a similar, albeit much broader, argument in *The Society of the Spectacle*.

² Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 30.

contributes to a cultural sphere defined by the nineteenth-century British critic Matthew Arnold as the "best which has been thought and said."³ More recently, the version of inequality that preoccupies critics has been imported more or less directly from political discourse and concerns the evaluations implicit, it is said, within literature itself. How, for instance, are women or the indigenous represented relative to men, whites, or mestizos? Or how might a literary text advance the cause of equality, more broadly conceived? Still, however, and despite the traditionalists' lament that relativism now rules the roost, in fact notions of inequality or equality, and of better or worse, remain to the fore. It is just that new standards of judgment are in force. Meanwhile, the institutional and economic apparatus of book-publishing is always about calculation, measurement, and effect: costs, sales, awards, and so on. Inevitably implicated in that apparatus, literary criticism, too, is complicit in the conversion of the book as locus of literary experience into just another commodity. This is true as much of academic and scholarly commentary as it is of journalistic reviews. Literary criticism tends to side with exchange value rather than use value.

To separate out literature and criticism in this way, however, is of course an artificial exercise. Literature today is almost unimaginable without the apparatus of production, distribution, and reception that enables texts to find readers. It is hard to imagine use without exchange, although ironically that is what literature itself encourages us to do, by erasing (if only temporarily) our awareness of its own material supports. Almost as soon as we look up from the page, we too are engaged in the evaluation and calculation that we had briefly abandoned in the reading experience. Taken as a whole, then, literature and the critical apparatus that surrounds and enables it helps transform affect into effect, and packages difference as inequality. This is nowhere more visible than in the construct that is Latin American literature, by which I mean literature labeled as belonging to Latin America as a region rather than to Mexico or Peru (or wherever) as individual nations. Perhaps this visibility is because Latin American literature as such only comes into being through the process of translation, both literal and metaphorical, by which Latin American texts enter the world market. And this is a relatively recent phenomenon: for most intents and purposes, Latin American literature was invented as recently as the 1960s, with the region's so-called

³ Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, 6.

literary "Boom." In what follows, I retrace a brief history of the Boom, focusing first on how it came to redefine the template of what was "good" literature, and then on how it has subsequently waned in critical appreciation. Indeed, many Latin Americanist critics have practically deserted the field of literary criticism. I suggest that we should return to the study of literature, prepared now self-consciously (and self-reflexively) to embrace the "bad" Latin American literature as much as the "good."

When Latin American fiction burst onto global consciousness in the late 1960s, it was heralded as the savior of world literature. US novelist William Kennedy's review of Gabriel García Márquez was particularly hyperbolic but not especially atypical: "*One Hundred Years of Solitude* is the first piece of literature since the Book of Genesis that should be required reading for the entire human race. [. . . Mr. García Márquez's] success is one of the best things that has happened to literature in a long, long time."⁴ The fact that Kennedy's review was entitled "All of Life, Sense and Nonsense Fills an Argentine's Daring Fable" (my emphasis) shows that the specific provenance of this salvation was immaterial: Argentina, Colombia, it was all the same. What mattered was that something new had come along, to fill the gap left by a now waning First World modernism. Indeed, the Boom supplied an apparent efflorescence of vitality and inventiveness "at a moment," as critic Gerald Martin explains, "when such creativity was in short supply internationally [. . .] and critics repeatedly asked themselves whether the novel, in the age of the mass media, was now moribund."⁵ In 1967, for instance, novelist John Barth published a much-discussed essay on "The Literature of Exhaustion," a disquisition on "the used-upness of certain forms or exhaustion of certain possibilities."⁶ Yet the outlook is very different in Barth's follow-up essay, "The

⁴ Quoted. in advertising material, *New York Times*, May 6, 1970, 40; see also Kennedy, "Socialist Realism."

⁵ Martin, "Boom, Yes; 'New' Novel, No," 53.

⁶ Barth, "The Literature of Exhaustion," 310. Not that exhaustion is necessarily negative in Barth's view: he champions Samuel Beckett and, indeed, Jorge Luis Borges because they "paradoxically turn the felt ultimacies of our time into material and means for [their] work" (317).

Literature of Replenishment," published in 1980. Now the Latin American Boom has saved the day! Here for instance Barth's praise of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is, critic Johnny Payne observes, "as gushy and unqualified as a back-cover blurb. It is 'as impressive a novel as has been written so far in the second half of our century [. . .]. Praise be to the Spanish language and imagination!'"⁷ Or rather, presumably, praise be to Spanish *in translation*: Barth effaces the process of translation and promotion through which García Márquez's novel lands on his desk, and in which he himself participates so enthusiastically. Any hint at the workings of the market in symbolic goods would undermine those very qualities that Barth claims to find in the Latin American text: its "organic originality" that, in Payne's gloss, could "'magically' recover the conventions and artifices of the past, while at the same time cross-fertilizing U.S. writing."⁸

Latin America and its literary production was soon summarized in the two-word formula "magical realism," encapsulating both its "magical" inventiveness and the notion that it was intimately intertwined with some "real" political commitment. For Latin American literature was "good" twice over: because of its aesthetic innovation, and also thanks to a sense that it was somehow rooted in popular struggle.

The seal on the region's cultural achievement was the Nobel Prize in Literature awarded, first, to Miguel Angel Asturias in 1967 and Pablo Neruda in 1971, and later to García Márquez in 1982. The Prize citation on this latter occasion was framed as though the honor were awarded to the entire region rather than to one distinguished representative. "For a long time," it proclaims, "Latin American literature has shown a vigour as in few other literary spheres. It has won acclaim in the cultural life of today."⁹ The citation then delineates the two elements that make Latin American literature so worthy in the popular and critical imagination. First, the region combines "many impulses and traditions" that range from "folk culture, including oral storytelling, reminiscences from old Indian culture, currents from Spanish baroque in different epochs, influences from European surrealism and other modernism" and that collectively "are blended into a spiced and life-giving brew." Second, however, this heady cocktail, "spiced and live-giving," is further enhanced by a committed

⁷ Payne, *Conquest of the New Word*, 17.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Gyllensten, "Presentation Speech."

attachment to the cause of social justice. "The violent conflicts of political nature--social and economic--raise the temperature of the intellectual climate," we are told. The citation continues, again as though proclaiming a collective award: "Like most of the other important writers in the Latin American world, García Márquez is strongly committed politically on the side of the poor and the weak against oppression and economic exploitation."¹⁰ In short, the 1982 Nobel Prize is awarded less to an individual writer, than to a continent that has given renewed life to world culture; and less to a writer than to the *idea* of the writer as a politically-engaged intellectual who transforms difference into a passionate call for equality.

Even today, for most readers there is no other world literature that enjoys a similar aura of quality and even moral uprightness--except perhaps the modern notion of "world literature" itself, in which (by analogy with, say, "world music") the virtues of Latin American cultural production are extended to the entire Third World. Common conception has it that the very notion of "bad Latin American literature" is an oxymoron. Moreover, what is most remarkable about this successful branding of a continent's culture is that it is, nonetheless, a branding: it is a marketing operation, with extraordinary commercial results. As his Nobel Prize citation notes, García Márquez for instance "achieved unusual success," with *One Hundred Years of Solitude* "translated into a large number of languages and [selling] millions of copies."¹¹ The Nobel committee has explicitly to mark this success as "unusual" in the context of its award of its highest accolade. For once, literary value and market value here go hand in hand. Or in Martin's words, "What really confused the issue" of the Boom was that its protagonists "managed both to achieve critical recognition and to become bestsellers." The Latin American Boom involved "the wholesale conversion of literary production into a commodity process" without, apparently, the loss of its aura of exclusivity predicted by a theorist such as Walter Benjamin.¹²

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Martin, "Boom, Yes; 'New' Novel, No," 54. See Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction."

It did not take long, however, for a backlash to ensue, at least in the more refined circles of cultural criticism. Perhaps most famously, the British novelist Julian Barnes declared a moratorium on magical realism only two years after García Márquez's Nobel, and at precisely the point at which this style, now the signature gesture of the new category of "postcolonial" writing, was sweeping all before it. Barnes's mocking suggestion is that:

A quota system is to be introduced on fiction set in South America. The intention is to curb the spread of package-tour baroque and heavy irony. Ah, the propinquity of cheap life and expensive principles, of religion and banditry, of surprising honour and random cruelty. Ah, the daiquiri bird which incubates its eggs on the wing; ah, the fredonna tree whose roots grow at the tips of its branches, and whose fibres assist the hunchback to impregnate by telepathy the haughty wife of the hacienda owner; ah, the opera house now overgrown by jungle. Permit me to rap on the table and murmur "Pass!"¹³

How did Latin American fiction become so quickly a matter of ridicule? It is easy to blame its imitators. As critic Theo Tait points out, the 1980s saw "a flood of semi-supernatural sagas [. . .] released all over the world--full of omens, prodigies, legendary feats, hallucinatory exaggerations, fairytale motifs, strange coincidences and overdeveloped sense-organs."¹⁴ Tait even understates the case when he observes that "with time and overuse, artistic style degenerates into mannerism." In fact, magical realism was very soon subject to pastiche, and from there it was but a short step to Barnes's parody. Moreover, as Tait also comments, magical realism was particularly vulnerable to such transmutations. In that "wonder and novelty were always an important part of its appeal, [. . .] the style had a built-in obsolescence: the decline into artificial gesture and cheap exoticism was inevitable."¹⁵ Meanwhile, in Latin America itself the politics of the Boom had long been under fire, not least from the influential Uruguayan critic Angel Rama, for such failings as its exclusivity, its cult of the

¹³ Barnes, *Flaubert's Parrot*, 99.

¹⁴ Tait, "Flame-Broiled Whopper."

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

individual author, and for its "enslavement to the mechanisms of publicity."¹⁶ No wonder then that Latin Americanists should have turned almost wholesale either to more challenging texts by more recondite authors such as Diamela Eltit or Ricardo Piglia, or to non-literary or para-literary genres such as *testimonio* and so (as in the title of one of critic John Beverley's books) "against literature" altogether.¹⁷

Yet the strange result of this conjunction of circumstances is that those of us who teach Latin American literature for a living in North America and Europe find ourselves in a peculiar double bind. We can put non-canonical works on the syllabus, but so very often dampen the enthusiasm of students attracted to our classes precisely by the prospect that they will be reading what they regard in advance as the inventive and edifying work of the Boom and its sequels. Or we can teach García Márquez et. al., and perhaps even the still more popular avatars such as Isabel Allende or Laura Esquivel, but never quite without the sense that we are, however reluctantly, embracing a "bad" Latin American literature only because the students think it will do them some good.

Let us approach bad Latin American literature a little less abashedly, first by understanding its continued appeal, and second by perhaps reconsidering its (by now) middlebrow utopianism. For it is a prime instance of what we could call liberal, well-intentioned exoticism, a means by which to recognize and negotiate difference. In the context of the rapid globalization of culture and communications technologies of which the rise of Latin American literature was itself a part (with novels written by Colombians in Mexico, published in Barcelona, translated in London, and making bestseller lists in New York), magical realism offered a way of understanding a whole new set of differences that suddenly impinged upon Western consciousness. What is more, it offered a way of relating to these novelties: it proposed that the act of reading (or, more generally, cultural consumption) could itself be a form of solidarity. Reading (or perhaps merely buying) a work produced elsewhere could be a demonstration of acceptance and open-mindedness in the midst of the postnational confusion that could otherwise overtake traditional middle-class sensibilities. Reading came to seem a

¹⁶ Rama, "Carta de Angel Rama a Zona Franca," 15. See also Rama, "Angel Rama tira la piedra . . ."

¹⁷ Beverley, *Against Literature*.

political act. Hence the rise of "world" culture, as a particular variant on the global. By the late 1980s, Western consumers could face the heady onrush of globalization by wearing their Thai-style batik t-shirts, listening to Moroccan music as remixed in England, drinking free-trade Tanzanian coffee, and reading Paulo Coelho. Culture always involves position-taking, and Latin American literature, charged as it was with a sense of political engagement (the brand of the real), offered a paradigmatic market choice for those who felt vaguely ill at ease with their own self-consciousness as the economic beneficiaries of unequal trade. It is, in short, an important mode of what political philosopher Jacques Rancière would term the reconfiguration of the sensible (feeling itself) in postmodern times.¹⁸ Or to put this another way: if, as critic Idelber Avelar argues, in Latin America the Boom's success served as compensation for economic and political underdevelopment; outside of Latin America, precisely this same literature (and its successors) functioned according to a similar logic of compensation, but now to make up for *overdevelopment*.¹⁹

Finally, then, Latin American literature--compensation or comfort in the guise of self-improvement--has become the very epitome of middlebrow culture. No wonder it should have been so soon scorned by writers such as Julian Barnes, and also the object of wary regard by Latin American and Latin Americanist critics themselves. Like the classic middlebrow culture of the 1950s and 1960s as described by cultural critic Janice Radway, Latin American literature provides "a kind of social pedagogy for a growing class fraction of professionals, managers, and information workers," a "sentimental education" to guide them through, now, not so much modernity and modernization as postmodernity and globalization.²⁰ It mobilizes an "enthusiasm for sentiment," a way of reading "completely suffused by feeling and affect."²¹ At the same time, it offers a reconversion of value: if the Boom was striking originally for the way in which it transmuted aesthetic value into commercial value without, for all that, apparently destroying the aura of the work of art, perhaps the post-Boom, or the Boom's legacy, has been the magical transmutation of market value into political reassurance, the

¹⁸ Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*.

¹⁹ Avelar, *The Untimely Present*, 30-31.

²⁰ Radway, *A Feeling for Books*, 15, 17.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 29, 33.

purchase of a sense of engaged solidarity through the exercise of cultural taste. But it is not, in this sense, all that different from *testimonio* as read even by the most anti-literary of proponents of Latin American cultural studies. And rather than partaking in a new round of value judgments in which some texts would always end up better than others, perhaps we can turn around the liberal desire to cast difference as (in)equality; we can examine and teach bad Latin American literature as symptom of unfulfilled desires in the global North as much as the South. At stake is a redistribution of the sensible that precedes any struggle over how what is sensed is to be evaluated or weighed.

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