

Introduction

The literary map of Latin America and the Caribbean is peppered with imaginary places, from the Seven Cities of Cibola to Onetti's Santa María and the now universally recognized city of Macondo. But alongside these imaginary places sit Buenos Aires, Mexico City, Rio, the Venezuelan llano, the Brazilian *sertão*, the rainforest, the wind-swept wastes of Patagonia, the many islands of the Caribbean. All of these are contained within frontiers – political, linguistic and cultural – which are as subject to change or re-imagining as the borders of Macondo or Santa María. It is often a treacherous business to seek precise correspondence between the literary and the geographical atlases: they sometimes mirror one another, and at other times they are in a relation of mutual denial. That relationship can be a central theme, for example, as writers grapple with political issues, historical responsibilities, the consequences of economic organization, ethnic, social and gender divides, and rapid change in rural and urban life. But it is equally possible that literary expression will not take as its theme the materials of actual experience. Does that make it any less representative of the region? Do literary texts that explicitly refer to social realities necessarily express the deep configurations of lived experience? This distinction may be false in any event, since we are dealing with constructions of the imagined.

At the same time, the century that concerns us in this volume is certainly one in which the question of the relations between literature and the real world have been profoundly contested, nowhere more intensely than in Latin America and the Caribbean. This is a feature of the period that begins at the end of the nineteenth century, when Latin American and Caribbean literature began to seek forms of

literary expression which, while acknowledging their debt to Europe, are nonetheless original and new. Perhaps the emphasis on novelty or originality was at first a statement of aesthetic independence from the old colonial centres (often expressed with new force during the centenary celebrations of national independence in Spanish America and Brazil, in the period between 1910 and 1922). The implications of this disengagement from the European reality, however, often produced – or demanded – a new kind of engagement with the real.

Modernismo, the Avant Garde and Regionalism

Yo persigo una forma que no encuentra mi
estilo
botón de pensamiento que busca ser la rosa
Rubén Darío

There is no doubt that the towering figure in the movement known as *modernismo* in Spanish America (the Brazilian movement would begin later) is the Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío. His *Prosas profanas* (1896) contains a preface which to all intents and purposes is a manifesto for the modernista movement. An expression of the aesthetic aspirations of cosmopolitan intellectuals in peripheral countries ('mi mujer es de mi patria, mi novia es de París'), it drew on some of the formal developments in the French literature of the time and on notions of 'art for art's sake' (Wilde, Whistler, etc.) with their implications of what could be described as an aristocracy of the spirit. The same idea is expressed in the most famous long essay of the period, José Enrique Rodó's *Ariel* (1900), which exhorts the youth of Latin America to follow a higher spiritual

calling (associated with 'Latin' culture, presumably as much French as Spanish) against the utilitarian culture Rodó associates with the Anglo-Saxon world, particularly the United States. That key opposition echoes an earlier essay by the Cuban José Martí, who in 1891, in his essay 'Nuestra América' similarly contrasted the spiritual and the utilitarian, this time in a rousing call to cultural and political independence both from Europe and from the colossus of the north. To underline the fact that this was a general preoccupation across the continent, one could mention the growth of a modernista movement in Mexico reflected in key journals such as the *Revista azul* and *Revista moderna*. In Brazil, Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis had expressed in his 'Instinto da nacionalidade' (1873) similar ideas about the distance that Brazilian literature had acquired relative to Portuguese literature (and to European literature more generally), which he (like Borges some decades later) considered something of an advantage, since it allowed for irreverence and innovation.

Darío's later work *Cantos de vida y esperanza* (1905) includes a number of significant political poems such as 'Canto a Roosevelt' and 'Cuauhtémoc' which are similarly concerned with the forging of a Latin American cultural identity founded on national projects informed by intellectual and spiritual ideals. Curiously these are not the most familiar poems of Darío's today, since his earlier 'art for art's sake' poems (a good example is the famous 'Sonatina') seemed to capture best the cultural aspirations of the *fin de siècle*. In contrast, Rodó's essay spawned a whole series of so-called 'arielista' texts, which later influenced the tradition of the essay of national identity (Alcides Arguedas, Antonio S. Pedreira, Octavio Paz, Ezequiel Martínez Estrada).

One result of these cultural interventions in the debates about political independence was in a sense to compromise the isolationism (what Darío called the 'reino interior', studied by Roberto González Echevarría in an important essay on Rodó and the supposed autonomy of art). Perhaps that was the significance of Enrique González Martínez's call in a sonnet of 1914 to 'twist the swan's neck', a call taken up later in a very different kind of poetry by the younger poets of the avant-garde.

The poets and writers who contributed to the

new experimental literature assembled under the concept of the avant-garde shared common attitudes to language and form. Beyond that their views and attitudes differed greatly. In some senses, this new phase in Latin American writing challenged – or to use a current rather than a contemporary term, *deconstructed* – language and broke through the certainties that form enshrined. If the modernistas in some sense appropriated the symbolic universes of the *fin de siècle*, the Latin American avant-garde addressed and circumvented the idea of totality. Modernity as they were experiencing it was fragmentary and incomplete; it was utopia and dystopia at once. Perhaps that was in its way a function of a new communication between Europe and Latin America, an exchange of ideas and experiences that took many artists to Europe – César Vallejo, Oliverio Girondo, Vicente Huidobro, José Juan Tablada, Jorge Luis Borges – but drew European artists and writers to Latin America in search of a different cultural history. André Breton travelled repeatedly to Mexico, for example, while Le Corbusier, the key figure in architecture of that period, found his most enthusiastic following in Brazil.

While the avant-garde is a complex movement, it would be wholly wrong to see it as a mere imitation of Europe. The highly significant Modern Art Week in São Paulo in 1922 evolved into the Antropofagia movement led by Oswald de Andrade which insisted that Brazil must absorb, or cannibalize, Europe. César Vallejo dismembered the language of all the historic certainties that Europe had bequeathed to Latin America. Vicente Huidobro embarked on his extraordinary poem *Altazor* in 1919 and completed it with a kind of verbal cataclysm in 1931. The speed and cacophony of the modern city found echoes in the work of Girondo, the Estridentista group in Mexico, and in the writings of the group around Graça Aranha in Brazil. And the impact of the mass communications media, the beginning of cinema, the proliferation of radio, all emphasized the new possibilities and the gap between the different locations of the national experience.

In a sense, the impulse to revolutionize and transform was present throughout the avant-garde – a function of the sense of the collapse of an old order in the 1920s and onwards. Yet there was no

agreement as to how that transformation might be achieved materially, nor on the relationship between the imagined new world and its political expression. Thus many writers felt their vanguardism a political obligation, broadly interpreted. The Boedo group in Argentina took its social obligations very seriously, while those who wrote for the avant-garde journals such as *Martín Fierro* tended towards a social conservatism in uneasy co-existence with aesthetic experimentation. For Nicolás Guillén in Cuba or the Puerto Rican poet Luis Palés Matos, the new direction was a return to the language of black or mulatto music and speech, a new encounter with orality and the invisible cultures of oppressed minorities. The *indigenista* writers were at least in part moved by the same concerns, yet their work was often aesthetically conservative, at least until the generation of José María Arguedas and Manuel Scorza in Peru drew on the innovative aesthetics of the avant-garde.

The 1920s and 1930s are witness to literary and cultural movements which at first sight appear to move in quite contrary directions. On the one hand, there was the regionalism that considered the issues of cultural creation through a developmentalist lens. Here the issue was to reproduce in some senses the European experience of progress and enlightenment, two functions of a single process. This is expressed particularly in the iconic novels of the era, Rivera's *La vorágine* (1924) and Gallegos's *Dofia Bárbara* (1929), as well as the early *indigenista* writing. The essays and autobiographies of José Vasconcelos in Mexico may be seen in the same framework; he was engaged in the active construction of a new national culture in Mexico, where the Revolution of 1910-17 had inaugurated a new 'revolutionary' state. And the writings and activism of José Carlos Mariátegui in Peru may both be seen as explorations of the encounter between politics and culture in the context of a struggle to define national culture. In a different sense, Claude McKay's *Banana Bottom* (1933) may be set in the same framework, exploring as it does the historical experience of plantation life that informs and distorts the historical present.

In this regard, it was of particular concern to these writers that substantial sectors of the national population (peasants, blacks, Indians) remained apart from the state projects; these writers found

themselves writing 'about' and yet 'for' a community which had not yet been forged, a community that had been imagined but did not exist. This leads to a literature that is plagued by good intentions: Jorge Icaza's *Huasipungo* (1934), for instance, while denouncing the condition of Ecuadoran Indians, reads today as a racist text, and the same could be said of a number of other products of the *indigenista* and *negrista* currents. Mariátegui stated with considerable prescience that *indigenismo* writes about the Indian, but that a true indigenous literature would only be written when there were Indian writers to produce it.

A new world, then, was emerging and projects for change and cultural transformation found their expression in every area of Latin American culture through the 1920s and early 1930s. But by then the impact of the Great Depression served both to radicalize the national project and bring home the material obstacles in the way of its realization. That contradiction was explored in many ways – in pastiche and parody, in a denunciatory social realism and a passionate utopianism, and increasingly in an ironic distancing. All of these features may be found, for example, in the emblematic work of the period, Aimé Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (1939) which still carried the revolutionary impulse of an earlier modernism. Especially in the wake of the Spanish Civil War, whose effects were perhaps more immediately palpable in Latin America than the World War of 1939-45, disillusionment and withdrawal permeate a range of literary expression – from Vallejo and Huidobro to the sceptical fictions of Borges.

The beginning of the recognition of the failure of the avant-garde yields the space to a different project, often involved with a nation-building literature (sometimes closely associated with state projects). What is at stake in these cultural nationalist projects is the uncertainty about how a national culture can be forged, particularly in a culturally and economically peripheral nation and in a period of deepening crisis. It is clearly not enough for the cultural disposition to exist: there is an inescapable relationship between that disposition and the material circumstances which are a limiting condition. That is a core preoccupation, for example, of the poets and writers who gathered around Caribbean literary journals such as *Bim* and

Kyk-over-al through the 1940s in a common search for a renewed language and a validation of the experience of the colonized. Some, such as George Lamming in *In the Castle of My Skin* (1953), turned to Africa; others, many of them in an exile enforced by the lack of cultural and economic opportunities in the region, recreated a Caribbean of the imagination in the language of the metropolis.

For many writers, the focus of their attention in this period of national consolidation turns towards the modern sector, and to the growing cities in which this sector is located. The hope of a leap forward into industrialization and modernity would be fulfilled in the growing urban environment – and the struggles in the countryside come to occupy a diminishing proportion of cultural attention, at least as the source of cultural renewal. The *Antología de la literatura fantástica* (1940), compiled by Borges, Adolfo Bioy Casares and Silvina Ocampo, was the signal for writers to return to imagined worlds, although whether those imaginary places were the product of the individual imagination or the collective unconscious would continue to be debated. For Alejo Carpentier, for example, writing in the preface to his 1949 novel *El reino de este mundo*, the marvellous was a facet of a Latin American reality as multi-layered and contradictory as an excited André Breton, the founder of surrealism, had hoped it would be. Julio Cortázar, José Donoso and Juan Rulfo each moved between the real and the symbolic. Juan Carlos Onetti and Ernesto Sábato moved in urban settings. The shaping development, however, was the growth of national-populist projects such as those of Juan Domingo Perón in Argentina and Getúlio Vargas in Brazil in which cosmopolitanism would often be seen as a mode of withdrawal from the construction of the state. Yet the overwhelming tenor of the times was a descriptive narrative of alternative histories, of ethnography, and of a debate on national identity expressed and developed in every area of culture, from music and architecture to narrative and theatre. Mário de Andrade, Octavio Paz, Germán Arciniegas, Gilberto Freyre, Fernando Ortiz, Augusto Salazar Bondy and many others contributed to the discussion.

In the 1950s the limits of the industrialization that occurred in Latin America were reached. On the one hand, state control over the economic process

had not led to independence from the market. By the middle of the decade it was clear that while growth and urbanization had occurred, these had not served to level, let alone eliminate, the internal inequities within Latin America, or within each country. Carlos Fuentes's novel *La región más transparente* (1958), set in a burgeoning Mexico City, provided a vast mural of the contradictory dynamics of the capital. Juan Rulfo's iconic *Pedro Páramo* (1955) and Onetti's *El astillero* (1961) might, in their different ways, be read as allegories of the failure of a project.

Yet Fuentes, together with Mario Vargas Llosa and Gabriel García Márquez, would within the decade become Latin America's most successful cultural exports with the commercial impact of the 'Boom' in the Latin American novel. Fuentes's first major contribution to the phenomenon, his novel *La muerte de Artemio Cruz*, in 1962, was completed three years after, and against the background of, the Cuban Revolution. This was not a coincidence.

The Cuban Revolution, the Cold War and the Boom

The Cuban Revolution of 1959 was in the first instance an event in the terrain of politics. The fall of the dictatorship of Batista, a loyal defender of US interests in the region, and the triumphant entry into Havana of the revolutionaries of the 26th of July movement, resonated around the continent. The hegemony of the United States throughout Latin America – its ability to use its ideological influence and economic power to control events – had been successfully challenged. What followed, in Washington, was what John Gerassi called the 'great fear' that such a challenge might be mounted elsewhere. In Latin America itself, the overthrow of Batista privileged the Cuban experience in all subsequent political debate. Its methods became the model, and its project for national independence the road to follow.

The rejection of US hegemony was at once political and cultural; the new Cuban government under Castro returned to the question of national culture and its role in nation-building that had been such a central preoccupation for earlier cultural movements. Its first formulation – though not necessarily a very clear one – came in 1961, when Castro delivered his 'Words to the intellectuals' at a

conference in April of that year. The phrase that crystallized his injunction became something of a formula – albeit one whose imprecision allowed endless re-interpretations – ‘Within the revolution everything, outside the revolution nothing’. The suggestion of open debate and flexibility was a little disingenuous, especially when a number of Cuba’s pre-revolutionary intellectuals found themselves under mounting pressure to write *for* the revolution, as opposed to simply within it. Increasingly, as the decade wore on, loyalty to the revolution and loyalty to the Cuban government were deemed to be one and the same thing. In Cuba itself, this produced a number of debates among Latin American writers who had initially supported the revolution, for example, Mario Vargas Llosa and Carlos Fuentes. Julio Cortázar, the Argentine writer who was an enthusiastic supporter, took part in a three-sided debate with Vargas Llosa and Oscar Collazos (published in 1971) around issues of creative freedom for the writer and the imposition of ‘acceptable’ styles and models of writing. And the whole issue came to a dramatic crisis in 1968, with the announcement of the result of the Casa de las Américas prize for that year.

Casa de las Américas was a project the purpose of which was to bring together Latin American writers and artists who supported the Cuban Revolution and shared its aspiration to create a new Latin American culture. The assumption was that these two kinds of commitment were interchangeable. Yet while the innovative work of Cuban filmmakers and musicians was opening new creative avenues, the situation of writers became less clear, especially if they expressed an unwillingness to ‘place their writing at the service of the revolution’. Thus, when the results of the prestigious Casa prize competitions were announced, they included the poet Heberto Padilla and the playwright Antón Arrufat among the victors. Yet when their work was published, both were prefaced by critical official statements that denounced their questioning of the revolutionary project in their respective works. A year later, Padilla was detained by the Cuban authorities and released only after he had made a humiliating confession of his errors.

For many Latin American intellectuals, this represented a parting of the ways. A new genera-

tion of young poets and writers of fiction – as well as some more seasoned – held to the limits set down by the cultural policies of the Castro government, producing forms of expression that in some way or another adhered to notions of social responsibility and public testimony. And just as it did in the economic and military realm, the United States responded with a sustained cultural challenge enshrined in an ill-fated journal – *Mundo Nuevo* – edited in Paris by Emir Rodríguez Monegal (and later continued in Buenos Aires by others), which drew together both critics of the Cuban regime and those who in a more nebulous way defended intellectual freedom and creative individualism.

Yet the debate about literature and its social function was not easily reduced to political positions. For just as the idea of a revolutionary poetry found echoes in the young guerrilla poets of the 1960s, writing (and dying) in Peru, Guatemala, Colombia and Nicaragua, so the argument about imaginative freedom was explored through a rediscovery of the discussions about myth and reality embedded in the concept of ‘lo real maravilloso’. Wilson Harris’s polyphonic novel *The Palace of the Peacock* (1960) in some senses marked the track. In its new manifestation, that of magical realism, the Latin American novel invaded the expanding world publishing market. Carlos Fuentes’s *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* (1962), Mario Vargas Llosa’s *La ciudad y los perros* (1962), Julio Cortázar’s *Rayuela* (1963) and, most dramatically of all, Gabriel García Márquez’s *Cien años de soledad* (1967) marked the peaks of what became known as the Boom. The term defined the group only in terms of its commercial success. A number of critics followed who set out to define its aesthetics or, in the case of Donoso, its social origins. No consensual explanation emerged, but the phenomenon of what Fuentes called ‘la nueva novela latinoamericana’ can tentatively be situated historically and in terms of literary histories and developments. It is not a coincidence, for example, that the new novel coincided with the economic re-integration of Latin America into the world market after the failure of a model of import substitution (and its attendant cultural projects) to open the way to forms of autonomous development. From the perspective of Europe and North America, by contrast, a new generation was turning its gaze towards a third

world seen as enshrining in some sense an unmistakable reality of oppression and resistance. If magical realism drew into a single narrative the conflicting perspectives of the official and the unofficial histories, the written and the spoken, the historical and the mythic, then that could and did respond to a political and ideological vision centred on the inescapable conflicts – class, national, sexual and ethnic – which characterized a global capitalist system.

In poetry, too, these conflicts are enacted as challenges to language and within language – in Ernesto Cardenal, Nicanor Parra, Brazil's mimeograph poets; in theatre, performance as an extension of public debate and a means of personal transformation, is an idea developed in and through the work of Augusto Boal and his followers and, in a different sense, through the theatre movement in Colombia that has Enrique Buenaventura at its heart. In the same sense the poets of 'nation-language' and the spoken and performed word brought the subversive impact of orality into the very heart of an Anglophone literary world in the 1960s and 1970s. In prose fiction, Kamau Brathwaite echoed that new direction.

Yet the 1970s are, in some sense, a time of reflux, a reassessment of the revolutionary possibilities in the light of the repressive military regimes now established in Chile, Uruguay, Argentina, Brazil and Guatemala. The critical impulse so characteristic of the previous decade has made culture an enemy of tyrannies. The earliest decrees of the Pinochet regime in Chile, for example, identified and banned a series of cultural expressions. Exile became an identifying shared experience for many Latin American writers and artists and as a result the creation of imaginary countries or a withdrawal into the past in a search for explanations – or perhaps even solace. Augusto Roa Bastos's *Yo el Supremo* (1974) and Carpentier's *El recurso del método* (also 1974) may stand as examples. For those who remained within the repressive national milieus, the critical voice became often oblique and obscure, allusive and challenging as much by the collapse of reason as by an alternative rationality – Diamela Eltit and Raúl Zurita in Chile, or Ricardo Piglia in Argentina, for example.

At the same time the work of Manuel Puig in Argentina and Luis Rafael Sánchez in Puerto Rico,

or the new *crónica* form developed particularly in Mexico by Carlos Monsiváis found resistance and distance in the vocabulary of mass culture – a new rhetoric, or anti-rhetoric, at once pastiche and critique. Its development was theorised in its turn by Néstor García Canclini and Roberto Schwarz.

It is one of the curiosities of the Boom that while it was extraordinarily influential and widely disseminated outside Latin America, it produced very few younger adherents on the continent itself. It may be that the engagement with history, whether from a conservative or a progressive point of view, that was at the heart of the movement, seemed less possible in the real conditions of the 1970s; it may be that historical optimism encountered its limiting experience in the overthrow of the Allende government in Chile. Whatever the reason, the literature of the late 1980s did not return to the ample visions of the decade of the 1960s, despite the 'transition to democracy' which largely replaced military by civilian governments across the continent. The revolutionary voices of Nicaragua, in the wake of the 1979 Revolution, were increasingly compromised by the tenuous hold of the Sandinistas on power and by what appeared to be at best the stalemate, at worst the defeat of the resistance elsewhere in Central America. It seemed that by and large writers now jealously preserved a degree of distance from their subjects, preferring instead to explore psychological and subjective landscapes.

It was that very process which produced a major debate around the issue of authenticity and self-expression. If the voice of the oppressed had not echoed with sufficient strength in the works of magical realists, 'how then could the subaltern speak', to use Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's now famous phrase? One answer was the 'literatura de testimonio', the direct narrative in which the 'author' was solely a facilitator, exemplified by the autobiographical accounts of Rigoberta Menchú and Domitila Barrios among others. The difficulty, it soon emerged, was that the agent – the scribe – could not be and never was neutral, but instead in translating orality into the realm of the written embedded it precisely within the dominant culture itself. Worse still, that echoed back on to the speaker, according to David Stoll, so that the

authentic voice became a conscious participant in a narrative genre.

The contemporary scene

It is hard to define the contours of the contemporary writing scene in Latin America and the Caribbean because many phenomena are taking place and are difficult to place in perspective. A few observations are possible, however. One is the solid place in contemporary writing of voices that might once have been considered to come 'from the margin', though that very formulation seems offensive now. Derek Walcott's *Omeros* (1990) shifts the heartland of cultural enquiry to an unmistakable Caribbean milieu – from the centre to the margins. Women's writing is central everywhere, and women are an important share of the reading public: the public success around the world of Isabel Allende was more a symptom than a catalyst, with important voices such as Elena Poniatowska and Carmen Boullosa in Mexico, Zee Edgell and Zoila Ellis in Belize, Ana María Del Río in Chile, Ana Lydia Vega and Mayra Santos Febres in Puerto Rico. Another central fact of literary production today is the importance of gay and lesbian writing, with central figures such as Juan Pablo Sutherland and Pedro Lemebel in Chile, Mario Bellatín in Mexico, Sylvia Molloy in Argentina, and Norge Espinosa and Pedro de Jesús Pez Acosta in Cuba. Indigenous and mestizo writers, including Elicura Chihuailaf in Chile, Humberto Ak'abal in Guatemala, and a whole array of Paraguayan poets who write in Guaraní, are bringing to fruition Mariátegui's predictions about the emergence of an indigenous literature, and are exploring the literary possibilities of indigenous languages (some of which did not have written traditions in the past) and of bilingual writing. Writing by African-Latin Americans and African-Caribbeans – including such important voices as Nancy Morejón in Cuba and Mayra Santos Febres in Puerto Rico – are central to the literary scenes in their countries.

If today's world is increasingly fluid and dislocated, then the displacement of writers has also become a central part of this story. While some

writers have long written from the metropolitan centres – V.S. Naipaul in England is perhaps the pre-eminent example – recent displacements have affected writers of the most diverse class, ethnic and racial backgrounds, and have often resulted in linguistic displacement as well. Julia Alvarez of the Dominican Republic, Edwidge Danticat of Haiti, Cristina García and Achy Obejas of Cuba, all of whom live in the US, have written their literary work in English. The 'border arts' performance movement, associated especially with the name of Guillermo Gómez Peña, has made aggressive use of Spanglish and of a sharp questioning of fixed identities. Some artists are working across not just languages but media, as is the case of the Chilean Catalina Parra. And the growth of new expressions, like the urban 'crónicas', suggest that the local may have found ways to subvert the global culture market in literary acts at once transient and as dynamic as the constantly changing speech of the Latin American street. Thus the curiously eclectic writings of the Zapatista leader Subcomandante Marcos suggest just such a will to speak from the margins to the discontented heartlands of the megacities of the new millennium. The relation in some has reversed, and the brutal realism of the inner city, or the slums, ironically has come to fascinate and terrify the global audience for film and the new harsh fictions of inner-city alienation. It may be a peculiarly appropriate sign of the times that the golden lands that brought the colonizers to Latin America's shores over 500 years ago should now have become Paulo Lins's 'Cidade de Deus' and Patricia Melo's *Inferno* (1999), from which the excluded watch knowingly the explosive growth of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo and await the reckoning so subtly suggested in the apocalyptic fables of Mario Bellatín, Fernando Vallejo or Diamela Eltit.

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