

Rescuing the novel

Letters between four giants of Latin American literature

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LAS CARTAS DEL BOOM
JULIO CORTÁZAR, CARLOS FUENTES,
GABRIEL GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ, MARIO
VARGAS LLOSA

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THE FOUR AUTHORS of these selected letters, written mostly between the mid-1950s and the mid-1970s, became giants of Latin American literature. Gabriel García Márquez and Mario Vargas Llosa received Nobel prizes. (Carlos Fuentes and Julio Cortázar deserved one, too, say the editors.) All four were good friends. All four lived mainly in Paris, Barcelona and London. Along with a few others, including the Chilean José Donoso and the Cuban Guillermo Cabrera Infante, they belonged to a group of Latin American novelists that came to be known as the “boom generation.”

From the mid-1960s there was growing international interest in Latin American fiction. Critics had become pessimistic about the future of the novel in general, but these four novelists believed they were on a rescue mission. Fuentes writes to Vargas Llosa in 1964 that “the future of the novel is in Latin America, where everything is yet to be said and to be named”. Vargas Llosa had long regarded the European novel as having reached a dead end. He was especially scathing about the French *nouveau roman*. Answering Fuentes, he derides the writer and film-maker Alain Robbe-Grillet for claiming that “literature has nothing to say”, that its only purpose is the “creation of innovative form”. Fortunately, he goes on, Latin America has “the energy, the myths, the stories capable of saving the genre”. And, interestingly, the novelists believed that it was easier to capture these fresh Latin American stories while living in Europe. Only at this distance did they recognize their commonality. Only there could they feel free to unleash their imaginations, uninhibited by the provincialism of local milieux.

The “boom” novels were quickly translated into many European languages. In 1967 the *TLS* ran an influential special number on Latin American Literature. It contained an essay on poetry by the Mexican writer Octavio Paz, one on the novel by Vargas Llosa and a general introduction by the Uruguayan critic Emir Rodríguez Monegal.

Rodríguez Monegal was editor of *Mundo Nuevo*, a Latin American monthly founded in Paris in 1966, to which all four novelists contributed. *Mundo Nuevo* fed the “boom” as a concept, both defining it and turning its authors into something of a clique. Their correspondence shows that they were well aware of this. The four writers refer constantly to each other, and hardly at all to predecessors or contemporaries of equal merit. There is barely a reference to Jorge Luis Borges, although one cannot imagine the work of Cortázar or García Márquez without him, or to Adolfo Bioy Casares, also from



Argentina and another influence on both, or to Clarice Lispector. And there is no mention at all of Juan José Saer, an extraordinary Argentinian novelist who lived in Paris from 1968 until his death in 2005 – he came from the distant province of Santa Fe, and simply didn’t belong in the group.

Mundo Nuevo’s greatest scoop was to publish two chapters of García Márquez’s *Cien años de soledad* (One Hundred Years of Solitude) a year before the book’s publication in 1967. The following year the magazine was hit by revelations in the *New York Times* that an important source of its funding, the Congress for Cultural Freedom, was a front for the CIA. Rodríguez Monegal at first denied this, but resigned in the face of mounting evidence in July 1968. The magazine closed in 1971.

From 1968 onwards political issues became increasingly prominent in the correspondence. The writers were all left-wing, and staunch supporters of the Cuban Revolution. But while some of the events of 1968 served to reinforce their left-wing views, the effect of others was more complicated. In May 1968 Fuentes travelled to Paris from London to witness, enjoy and eventually write about the student uprisings. But in August that year Warsaw Pact tanks rolled into the Czech capital to quell the Prague Spring. In their letters the novelists profess shock. They condemn the action and express disappointment in Cuba for supporting it. (Only Vargas Llosa dared criticize the Cubans in public.) On October 2 there was a massacre in Mexico of students protesting against the government. This occasions a burst of solidarity in the correspondence for an outraged Fuentes, and for Paz, who resigned as Mexican ambassador in New Delhi. On October 3 a coup d’état in Peru prompts mixed feelings in Vargas Llosa, who welcomes its left-wing elements, but deplors the military dimension.

The biggest issue for the novelists, however, is Cuba. It becomes clear that the regime will not tolerate dissent from writers, Cuban or not; unconditional adherence is also expected from the four correspondents, whose loyalty is tested by Fidel Castro’s increasing authoritarianism. In 1968 the Cuban poet Heberto Padilla was persecuted for writing that a novel by Cabrera Infante, by then in exile in London, was better than one by party hack Lisandro Otero. In 1971 Padilla was imprisoned, and on his release he made a startling public confession of his misdemeanours.

The four novelists react differently to these events. At first García Márquez seems the angriest. “If our Cuban friends intend to become our

Carlos Fuentes, Mario Vargas Llosa, Julio Cortázar and Gabriel García Márquez; from the book under review

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 The friendship ended when Vargas Llosa punched García Márquez in the face outside a Mexican cinema

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police, I at least am going to tell them to go to hell”, he writes to Fuentes as early as March 1967. The Cubans “should not forget that we are independent writers, that we support them out of conviction and not because we are afraid of being imprisoned”. But ultimately it was García Márquez who remained closest to the Cubans and became a personal friend of Castro, along with Cortázar. Fuentes and Vargas Llosa drifted away. Vargas Llosa had a visceral horror of the lies deployed by Cuban officialdom. Disillusionment with the Cuban Revolution did not mean a swing to the right, however – Vargas Llosa and Fuentes join García Márquez and Cortázar in roundly condemning the 1973 coup in Chile.

They are fine critics of each other’s work. In 1971 Vargas Llosa published an academic study on García Márquez, *Historia de un deicidio*. In their correspondence the two are particularly close. On one amusing occasion in 1967, described in Vargas Llosa’s book on García Márquez and noted here, they are flying from Mérida to Caracas during a storm. Both have a fear of flying, and Vargas Llosa, writes García Márquez, was convinced the plane would crash. “Now that we are about to die,” he whispers to García Márquez, “tell me truthfully what you think of *Zona sagrada*.” Both had praised this novel by Fuentes in public, but were privately less admiring. The same year García Márquez suggests to Vargas Llosa that together they write a novel about the short-lived war between Colombia and Peru in 1932-3. According to García Márquez, always prone to exaggeration, the combatants never actually met because they got lost in the jungle. His idea was to show that a war between neighbouring countries can only be farcical. Alas, the friendship famously ended when Vargas Llosa punched García Márquez in the face outside a Mexican cinema in February 1976. Neither novelist ever revealed why they fell out.

The four writers regularly exchange work and respond to it in detail. This material, supplemented by essays at the end of *Las cartas del boom* in which the novelists write about each other, is of great value, because their semi-informal views are more interesting than academic criticism. Of particular note is the correspondence between Cortázar and Fuentes on the former’s *Rayuela* (1963; *Hopscotch*, 1966), and the latter’s *Cambio de piel* (1967; *A Change of Skin*, 1968). Both novelists had been criticised for the number of cultural references in their work. Both defend the practice, as did Borges before them. As writers on the periphery they feel they have a right to cultural borrowing. Fuentes and Cortázar also defend the metaphysical dimensions of their work and their “universalism” – “if we have lived with the thousand eyes of Argos and with the ubiquity of wandering Jews, I don’t see why we shouldn’t universalize our fiction,” Cortázar writes. “[M]aybe Goethe’s advice works the other way round, and that it is thanks to the universal that we can access the particular, you in Mexico and I in Argentina”.

Finally, their characters. García Márquez is always funny, and in the earlier years desperately short of money. Fuentes suggests that he work for *Mundo Nuevo* to make ends meet, but García Márquez declines – he already suspects that the magazine will come to a bad end. Vargas Llosa has the most active conscience. He truly suffers as he comes to realize the extent of Cuban authoritarianism. Cortázar is the most honest in his criticism of his colleagues’ novels. Fuentes is blissfully unembarrassed by his inherited wealth. He writes from villas and yachts. He flies on Concorde. He flirts with film stars.

The Argentine novelist Manuel Puig once drew up – for his friends – a chart in which three generations of Latin American writers were displayed as Hollywood actresses. Fuentes was Ava Gardner, with the caption “surrounded by glamour, but can she act?” The hard-working Vargas Llosa was Esther Williams: “Oh so disciplined.” I cannot now remember who the others were. ■