

REVIEWS

Julio Cortázar, Carlos Fuentes, Gabriel García Márquez and Mario Vargas Llosa, *Las cartas del Boom*. Edited by Carlos Aguirre, Gerald Martin, Javier Munguía and Augusto Wong Campos
Alfaguara: Barcelona / Mexico 2023, €23.90, paperback
568 pp, 978 607 382 914 4

TONY WOOD

A BOLIVARIAN REPUBLIC OF LETTERS?

In September 1967, Gabriel García Márquez and Mario Vargas Llosa held a public conversation at Peru's National University of Engineering about the extraordinary recent surge of creativity in the Latin American novel, already known as 'el Boom'. García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad* (*A Hundred Years of Solitude*) had just been published, and had catapulted its author to international celebrity, as well as becoming the signal work that embodied the many successes—esthetic and commercial—of the Boom itself. Yet during the dialogue in Lima, García Márquez cast doubt on its existence: 'I don't know if the phenomenon of the Boom is in reality a Boom of writers or a Boom of readers'.

Self-deprecating irony aside, García Márquez was pointing to what would become recurrent problems of definition. Was the Boom a matter of literary supply or readerly demand? And how should the Boom be situated relative both to Latin America's previous literary production and to other novelists currently writing? Chilean novelist José Donoso, in his 1972 *Historia personal del 'boom'*, went so far as to say that it mainly existed in the negative. 'If the Hispanoamerican novel of the 1960s has acquired that debatable unitary existence known as the Boom', he wrote, 'it is largely because of those who have dedicated themselves to denying it'. Defined principally by its detractors or those who remained outside its charmed circle, it was 'the product of hysteria, envy and paranoia'. Others saw the label as reductive: in a 1984 interview, Cuban novelist Alejo Carpentier referred to the Boom as 'a victim of its name', adding that it was 'insulting to refer to

Latin American literature in this way since booms are inherently ephemeral and lack substance’.

Many critical accounts of the Boom have sought to problematize its boundaries, extending them either chronologically—incorporating precursors such as Carpentier, Juan Carlos Onetti or Juan Rulfo—or numerically, to include a wider range of writers active in the 1960s and 1970s: Donoso himself, Guillermo Cabrera Infante, José Lezama Lima, among many others. The four editors of *Las cartas del Boom*—two Peruvians (Carlos Aguirre and Augusto Wong Campos), a Mexican (Javier Munguía) and an Englishman (Gerald Martin)—make the opposite move, holding up the relations between Julio Cortázar, Carlos Fuentes, García Márquez and Vargas Llosa as not simply emblematic, but constitutive of the Boom. Their guiding premises are that the Boom’s four most prominent figures were not only the ‘biggest’ Latin American writers of the time—the most successful and internationally renowned—but that they shared three other characteristics that singled them out. First, they wrote ‘totalizing novels’, assuming and surpassing their own regional literary traditions while assimilating and redeploying global modernism’s aesthetic breakthroughs—those of Faulkner, Joyce, Woolf, Kafka. Second, they ‘forged a solid friendship among themselves’; third, ‘they shared a political vocation’, marked above all by solidarity (at least initially) with the Cuban Revolution. As a result, they were a self-conscious unit, individually and collectively aware of their role in the political and aesthetic battles of the time. For the editors, the correspondence between these four writers thus offers unique insights into the Boom phenomenon. Not quite a collective autobiography, it is both more and less than a chronicle of that common project, shedding new light on many aspects of the Boom even as it leaves others in shadow.

Comprising some 207 letters plus a selection of articles, interviews and documents, *Las cartas del Boom* covers a period from 1955 to 2012. But the bulk of the book—the first 183 letters, occupying just under 350 pages—comes before 1975, with the rest effectively a postscript. Geographically, the correspondence spans Latin America and Europe, with three of the four spending considerable time in Paris, Barcelona and London as well as in their native countries; Cortázar, based in France from 1951 until his death in 1984, was the expatriate exception to the nomadic rule. If Paris was an all-purpose cultural crossroads and Barcelona a crucial editorial centre—both the publisher Seix Barral and the powerful agent Carmen Balcells were based there—Mexico City was another important node: García Márquez lived there from 1961 to 1967, writing most of *Cien años de soledad* in the Mexican capital, and he was based there again from 1975 until his death in 2014.

Geographical separation was, of course, a precondition for the correspondence between the four. For each of them, distance from their

homelands was often a political necessity; but it also clearly contributed to their creativity, whether by reducing distractions around them or by detaching them enough from their contexts to enable them more freely to re-engage these artistically. Their global mobility also contributed to another distinctive feature of the Boom: all four authors might be said to be located simultaneously within their respective national literatures and within a newly solidifying pan-regional Latin American literature. To be sure, the notion of a common literary tradition based on a shared language had been present since colonial times; but after independence its unity and coherence had often been tenuous, the dream of a continent-spanning Bolivarian republic of letters competing with or overshadowed by the construction of national cultures. It's no accident, then, that the figures most closely associated with the emergence of a broader Latin American literature—José Martí, Rubén Darío—were often exiles; the Boom in a sense repeated this pattern but on a much larger scale and with greater success.

The first link between the four was laid down in 1955 by Fuentes, writing to Cortázar asking him to contribute to the *Revista Mexicana de Literatura*. Born in Belgium to Argentinean diplomat parents in 1914, Cortázar was the oldest of the quartet. By the mid-1950s he had acquired a dedicated following for his short stories: *Bestiario* (Bestiary) was published in 1951, and *Final del juego* (End of the Game) in 1956. Tall, bearded, with a broad face and wide-set eyes, Cortázar had an otherworldly air, though his earnestness and ironic humour also come across in the letters and in his fiction, known for its uncanny atmospheres and psychological reversals; Antonioni's *Blow-Up* (1966) was based on Cortázar's 1958 story 'Las babas del diablo' ('The Devil's Drool'). He was also the most formally innovative of the four: his best-known work, *Rayuela* (Hopscotch, 1963), laid out two different sequences for reading the novel's numbered chapters.

Fuentes, born in Panama in 1928 and like Cortázar the son of a diplomat, grew up roving between Mexico and Chile, Brazil, the US and Switzerland; his first book of stories, *Los días enmascarados* (The Masked Days), appeared in 1955, but it was his polyphonic debut novel, *La región más transparente* (Where the Air Is Clear, 1958), that made his name. Prolific across several genres—by the time of his death in 2012 he had produced more than twenty novels, eleven short story collections, five stage plays and more than a dozen books of essays—Fuentes was a charming, dapper figure, debonair and outgoing where Cortázar was more withdrawn. In literary terms, while he shared the limelight with the other three at the Boom's peak, his present-day legacy outside Mexico is less substantial by comparison.

Vargas Llosa, born in Arequipa in 1936 but raised in Cochabamba and then Lima, was the youngest of the four. Having moved to Madrid for graduate studies in 1958, he met Cortázar in Paris later that year, and began

to correspond with him in 1959; by the time his first novel, *La ciudad y los perros* (Time of the Hero), appeared in 1963, he was already known as a precocious literary talent. More studious and serious than Fuentes, Vargas Llosa shared some of Cortázar's earnestness while for the most part adopting a more conventional approach to narrative form. His early novels wrestle intently with his country's political and moral dilemmas—the second sentence of *Conversación en La Catedral* (Conversation in the Cathedral, 1969) asks: 'at what precise moment had Peru fucked itself up?'—but his range soon expanded to include ribald comedies and historical novels. If *Pantaleón y las visitadoras* (Captain Pantoja and the Special Service, 1973), set amidst an army detachment in the Amazon, was the first and best-known of the former, perhaps the finest and most fully realized work in the latter category is *La guerra del fin del mundo* (The War of the End of the World, 1981), depicting the crushing of the Canudos rebellion in late nineteenth-century Brazil.

García Márquez, born in Aracataca in 1927, worked as a journalist in Colombia and Europe in the 1950s. (He would later recall seeing Cortázar at work in a Parisian cafe and being too shy to approach him.) His first novel, *La hojarasca* (Leaf Storm), appeared in 1955, followed in 1958 by the novella *El coronel no tiene quien le escriba* (No One Writes to the Colonel; originally published in the Colombian journal *Mito*, it appeared in book form three years later). After moving to Mexico City in 1961, García Márquez met Fuentes and through him, eventually, the others; but he only enters the correspondence in 1965. By far the most celebrated and successful of the four, thanks to *Cien años de soledad*, García Márquez shared Fuentes's outgoing personality, though laced with more comic irony than his Mexican peer. More than any other figure, García Márquez is associated with the concept of 'magical realism'—a mistranslation of *lo real maravilloso*, 'the marvellous real', a phrase originally used by Alejo Carpentier. Throughout his work, García Márquez was indeed gleefully attentive to the presence of the fantastical within the mundane, both in his fiction and in the journalism he continued to produce until late in life.

Although the editors frame the book as a four-way dialogue, the quartet very rarely met in person. There is only one photograph in which all four appear together, taken in the south of France in the summer of 1970. There are other notable asymmetries. Some of these are due to the vagaries of the archival record: the majority of the letters are drawn from the papers of Fuentes and Vargas Llosa, who kept the best records; in Fuentes's case, this helpfully included copies of letters sent as well as received. Cortázar was an assiduous correspondent but held onto none of his letters, making it all the more impressive that scholars have assembled several volumes of his correspondence; these were an important additional source for *Las cartas del*

Boom. Other imbalances are more a question of personality and communication style: Vargas Llosa more than once professed to having an 'epistolary phobia', while García Márquez notoriously preferred the telephone, and his letters—far fewer to begin with—are present only because one of the others kept them.

Throughout, it's Cortázar and Fuentes who are the driving forces, not only in terms of epistolary contributions but also of substantive ideas committed to paper. Starting in 1955, their exchanges established interpersonal dynamics and personae that would persist: Fuentes is youthful, energetic and entrepreneurial while Cortázar is avuncular, thoughtful and supportive. In his role as elder statesman, Cortázar is the only one of the four to supply substantive critical feedback on the others' work; a 1958 letter to Fuentes lays out some penetrating insights about a draft of *La región más transparente*:

You've committed the magnificent sin of the talented man writing his first novel: you've gone all in, you've put a world into five hundred pages, you've given yourself the pleasure of combining attacks with pleasure, elegy with pamphlet, satire with pure narrative . . . In sum: you have dispatched your 'human comedy' in one volume, without thinking that you were recounting strictly local things, that is, very difficult for non-Mexicans, and presenting situations that in many cases verge on a magical or metaphysical plane . . . reaching a point of saturation that is not always comprehensible.

Fuentes not only acted on some of Cortázar's suggestions, in 1972 he asked for the letter to be included in a new edition of the book, calling it 'a supreme example of what criticism should be'. In August 1965 Cortázar wrote a similarly thoughtful response to the manuscript of Vargas Llosa's *La casa verde* (The Green House, 1966), though his suggestions were seemingly ignored. Fuentes, by contrast, mainly offers enthusiastic congratulations: in February 1964, after reading Vargas Llosa's *La ciudad y los perros* he wrote to its author confessing to 'jealousy, of the good kind, before a masterwork that, in one stroke, takes the Latin American novel to a new level'. Three years later, overwhelmed by García Márquez's new novel, he told him that 'CIEN AÑOS DE SOLEDAD IS A MASTERPIECE'.

There is an obvious element of flattery here, but it's clear that Fuentes's enthusiasms were genuine: like countless other readers across Latin America, he was energized by the successive appearance of so many landmark novels. As he wrote to Vargas Llosa in February 1964, 'the future of the novel is in Latin America, where everything remains to be said, to be named'. Having read, one after the other, Carpentier's *El siglo de las luces* (Explosion in a Cathedral), Cortázar's *Rayuela*, García Márquez's *El coronel no tiene quien le escriba* and Vargas Llosa's *La ciudad y los perros*—all published

between 1961 and 1963—Fuentes felt ‘confirmed in that optimism: I doubt that in the last year any other cultural community produced four novels of that rank’. Modesty no doubt prevented him adding two more of his own, both published in 1962: *Aura* and *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* (The Death of Artemio Cruz).

Of the four, Fuentes seems to have been the most keenly aware that a major transformation of the Latin American novel was under way. More than being merely a part of this collective endeavour, he played a vital role in driving it forward and sustaining it. In 1964 he published an article titled ‘La nueva novela latinoamericana’, hailing a paradigm shift in the region’s literature and singling out the work of Cortázar, Carpentier and Vargas Llosa. Critical appreciation went hand in hand with practical assistance: many of Fuentes’s letters from the early 1960s involve him putting the others in contact with agents, translators and US publishers. It was also Fuentes who helped García Márquez find work writing screenplays in Mexico, which paid at least some of the bills while he was writing *Cien años*. The two men co-wrote an adaptation of Juan Rulfo’s *El gallo de oro* (The Golden Cockerel, 1964), directed by Roberto Gavaldón, as well as the screenplay for Arturo Ripstein’s *Tiempo de morir* (Time to Die, 1966), among a string of other film credits. At many points in the book, we see the four active in art forms besides the novel—theatre, film, poetry—adding to the impression of the Boom as a total phenomenon, overflowing aesthetic boundaries with ease.

The editors of *Cartas* dub the entire period from 1955 to 1975 a ‘*pachanga de compadres*’, very approximately translatable as ‘friends’ shindig’. The festive metaphor is certainly apt—Fuentes apparently hosted memorable parties in Mexico City—and different combinations of the four were at times very close. Partners and children (referred to as ‘nephews/nieces’) clearly formed an integral part of the circle of affections, as well as supplying eager readers for works in progress. But within this twenty-year bloc, there were important shifts both in the character of the Boom and in relations between the four, and it could usefully have been sub-periodized into three key stages.

During a first phase, running from 1955–67, each of the quartet achieved notable critical and commercial successes, and the four established bonds of friendship and writerly solidarity as well as that sense of a collective pan-regional project. García Márquez was wryly ironic about it: in December 1966 he wrote to Fuentes asking him to ‘help save the Latin American novel: send Gauloises Bleues to Vargas Llosa in London’ (the latter apparently despaired of the sweetness of English tobacco). Even at the time, the boundaries of the Boom were both aesthetic and generational. Writing to Fuentes in August 1964, Cortázar gently chided him for including Carpentier in his pantheon of ‘new’ Latin American novelists:

No one can admire more than I do Alejo's phenomenal style and the beauty of books such as *Los pasos perdidos* [The Lost Steps] or *El siglo de las luces*. Let that be clear. But . . . Alejo is a marvellous case of literary anachronism . . . You might say (Vargas [Llosa] said it last night, because he also admires Alejo a great deal) that much in our América is anachronistic in the literary field, that is, perhaps one can write *in different aesthetic times* without thereby ceasing to be 'new'. Agreed, but the sooner the time chosen by Carpentier runs out the better . . . Wasn't the baroque a style from three centuries ago?

The difference was not merely one of stylistic periods. All four laid claim to a distinctly international literary inheritance, seeing figures such as Faulkner or Kafka as their forebears as much as, or indeed more than, their respective national canons, with which they each sought to break in different ways. Formally, then, this quartet represented the 'cosmopolitan' face of the Latin American novel, as distinct from what Cortázar called its 'telluric' variant, anchored in highly localized realities. Writers in the latter camp included an older generation working in a social realist vein or with indigenous themes, such as the Peruvian José María Arguedas. In November 1968, Fuentes joked to Vargas Llosa about 'poor little Arguedas' and his outlook: 'My son: you will only be a good writer if you've been devoured by fleas or by the romanticism of poverty'. While this was not written for public consumption, the in-group arrogance from which it stemmed would have been apparent enough to those on the outside—and would only have been magnified by the Boom writers' increasing celebrity.

A second phase was inaugurated by the 1967 publication of *Cien años*. Its astonishing and immediate success transformed the fortunes not only of its author but of the whole 1960s cohort of Latin American writers. Thereafter, the Boom went global and the four became its public face, acquiring the status of all-purpose intellectuals whose opinions carried continental weight. In May of that year, Fuentes wrote to each of the others proposing a collective volume about Latin America's dictators—provisionally titled *Los Padres de las Patrias* (Fathers of the Fatherlands)—that testified to the Boom's Promethean ambitions, aiming at once to encompass and ruthlessly criticize each country's national tradition. The project never came to fruition, though some of the authors Fuentes enlisted for it went on to write 'dictator novels' of their own, notably Carpentier in *Recurso del método* (Reasons of State, 1974). It was in this phase, too, that the political views of the four began to feature more prominently—and, crucially, to diverge.

Considering its shaping role in Latin American politics and culture in the 1960s, Cuba features surprisingly little in the quartet's correspondence before 1966. Was their initial solidarity with Cuba so obviously shared that it didn't merit discussion? Its absence is puzzling, especially given how large

it loomed for each of the four separately. García Márquez travelled to Havana barely three weeks after the fall of Batista, and in 1960–61 worked for Prensa Latina, the press agency set up by the revolutionary government. Fuentes, too, visited the island early in 1959 and publicly supported the revolution at least until 1966. That year, Fuentes drew the ire of the Cubans by participating in a PEN Club event in the US. But for several years thereafter, he refused publicly to comment on Havana's cold-shouldering; as he explains in a February 1967 letter to Vargas Llosa, this would create the impression of a rift where none existed, needlessly presenting the anti-Communist right with a propaganda gift.

Cortázar didn't visit Cuba until 1963, but that trip marked a watershed in his political-intellectual evolution, and he returned many times. As he put it in a 1967 letter to Roberto Fernández Retamar, editor of the journal *Casa de las Américas*, his connection with the island was a kind of homecoming: 'now I felt I was situated at a point where [two things] converged and were reconciled, my firm belief in a socialist future for humanity and my individual and sentimental return to a Latin America I had left without a backward glance many years before'. Vargas Llosa first went to Cuba in 1962, covering the Missile Crisis as a journalist; he returned in 1965 to serve on the jury for the Casa de las Américas Prize alongside Cortázar, and again a year later to attend the Tricontinental Conference. Both Vargas Llosa and Cortázar were also in Havana for meetings of *Casa de las Américas's* editorial board in 1967 and 1971.

Yet when Cuba does begin to figure in the correspondence between the four, it is less as a model for revolutionary change than as a writerly obligation, and then a source of bitter discord. Global politics were the initial catalyst for the rifts. In August 1968, the four were among several Spanish and Latin American intellectuals to sign a statement condemning the Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia. Vargas Llosa, however, went further, criticizing Fidel Castro's pro-Soviet stance in a Lima newspaper—an impermissible move in the eyes of Havana, which soon made its displeasure known. Three months later, the four writers sent a telegram and a private letter to Castro expressing their concern over accusations against the Cuban poet Heberto Padilla of being 'ideologically counter to the revolution'. This, too, was not well received in Havana—something García Márquez foresaw, telling Vargas Llosa immediately afterwards that the letter 'won't do any good': 'Fidel will reply, with as much courtesy as he can manage, that what he does with his writers and artists is his business, and that we can therefore go screw ourselves'.

Though the initial storm over Padilla soon subsided, it ramped up again in March 1971, with the poet's imprisonment for 'counter-revolutionary

activities'. The 'Padilla Affair' marked the entrenchment of an increasingly bureaucratized approach to culture on the island. It also soured the relations of the four Boom writers, both with Cuba and with each other, initiating a third and final phase before the 'end of the party' in 1975. The quartet seemed at first to be united: in April 1971, *Le Monde* published an open letter to Castro signed by all four—along with European luminaries such as Simone de Beauvoir, Italo Calvino and Jean-Paul Sartre—protesting Padilla's arrest while affirming their solidarity with the Revolution. According to the editors of *Cartas*, the Cuban response was 'immediate': the books of all four were withdrawn from circulation.

Here their political paths diverged. García Márquez soon made it clear his name had been added to the letter without his consent, and thereafter he largely avoided commenting publicly on the affair. But in the wake of Padilla's show trial and 'confession' a month later, Fuentes and Vargas Llosa were among the signatories of a second letter condemning the handling of the case. Again the Cuban reaction was swift, their anger echoed by the revolution's many sympathizers across the region, making Fuentes and Vargas Llosa the objects of a wave of criticism from the left. In May 1971, the former lamented to the latter that 'the Cuban Revolution has sacrificed, with tantrums and slanders, the support of its oldest and most loyal friends to win that of the continent's sub-literature'. Vargas Llosa replied, still more distraught, that 'these last few days I've felt like I've gone crazy, because what seemed horrible and tragic to me struck many of my friends as not only understandable but even justifiable'. What was happening in Cuba, he added, was 'simply scandalous, a bad and useless copy of the worst Stalinist masquerades'.

Cortázar, by contrast, decided not to burn his bridges with Havana. As he explained to Fuentes in May 1971, 'the fact that the Cuban Revolution is still something that *in its essence* differs from what is happening in our multiple *gorilatos* [literally 'gorilla-doms', i.e., military dictatorships] obliges me to be on their side'. Torn between his loyalty to the Revolution and his right to a critical stance, Cortázar expressed his anguish in a poem titled 'Policriticism in the Hour of the Jackals': on the one hand, 'You are right, Fidel: only in the struggle is there the right to discontent', but on the other, 'if you can hear me in Havana, anywhere, / there are things I won't swallow / . . . in a march towards the light'. After a period of frostiness that lasted several years, both Cortázar and García Márquez re-established good relations with Havana; but for Vargas Llosa and Fuentes, the rupture triggered by the Padilla Affair was final.

At stake was not only the fate of an individual Cuban writer, but a whole conception of how politics and aesthetics should interrelate. Writing to Cortázar when the first accusations were made against Padilla in 1968,

Fuentes objected to the idea of functionaries in Havana standing in judgement over writers: 'we wouldn't tolerate this from any of our national oligarchies . . . even less reason to do so with a socialist regime with which we are in solidarity'. In broad terms, both Fuentes and Vargas Llosa stood firmly on the side of art's autonomy, and were horrified by any encroachment on the writer's sovereign realm; Cortázar and García Márquez had a perhaps less elevated view of the writer's status, and certainly a more pragmatic or instrumental understanding of their worldly role.

Other disparities among the four became increasingly apparent in the early 1970s. The occlusion of hopes raised in the 1960s was a major element in this: the Brezhnevization of Cuba unfolded in tandem with the advent of brutal dictatorships across the region, including of course the crushing of Allende's democratic socialism in 1973. Cortázar and García Márquez were very publicly aligned with the left at this time, working actively in solidarity movements and to support refugees from those regimes: the royalties from Cortázar's *Libro de Manuel* (*A Manual for Manuel*, 1973) were all donated to the families of political prisoners in Argentina, and both writers were involved in the Russell Tribunals on the crimes of the military juntas in the mid-1970s. Cortázar's books were banned by the Argentine generals, and his name would be among the 331 included on the regime's blacklist.

Fuentes, too, played his part in helping Chilean exiles find their way to safety in Mexico. But while the early 1970s were demoralizing years for all four, they seem to have been politically more disorientating for Fuentes and Vargas Llosa. Fuentes had been in Paris during the events of May 1968, and was exuberant at the prospect of an exit from the Cold War binary, with the *événements* appearing to offer a democratic path to socialism in a developed country. As he put it to Cortázar that July, 'Marx was right in the end . . . revolution in the industrialized world is possible, and possible with freedom'. But his optimism on that front proved unfounded, and with the Padilla Affair, Fuentes's discomfort with the Cuban model of revolution turned into overt criticism. Perhaps his most striking reversal, however, came in relation to Mexico's ruling PRI. Horrified by its massacre of protesters in October 1968, in 1975 Fuentes accepted a post as ambassador to Paris for the Echeverría administration. Though he resigned two years later when former president Díaz Ordaz, the butcher of Tlatelolco, was appointed envoy to Madrid, the symbolism of the gesture may have rung a little hollow: the Interior Minister who had directly ordered the crackdown in '68 had been Echeverría himself. Vargas Llosa also began to show signs of political disillusionment from around 1968: that November, García Márquez rebuked him for sending 'such a depressing letter' about the global political situation, adding that 'I had to drink half a litre of whisky to digest it'. (The letter itself is sadly lost.) In Vargas Llosa's case, too, the Padilla Affair and its sequelae

widened his rift with the left—though his full conversion to neoliberalism would come in the 1980s, accelerated by Peru’s spiralling economic crisis and the Shining Path insurgency.

Perhaps the clearest example of the post-1971 divides between the four was the short-lived journal *Libre* (Free). Published in Paris from 1971–72, it was designed to bring together Latin American and Spanish writers. All four of the *Cartas* quartet contributed in some way across its four issues, but Vargas Llosa was the most centrally involved in editorial terms, alongside Spanish novelist Juan Goytisolo. From the outset, the journal was the object of intense suspicion, in particular from Havana. Was it intended as a competitor to *Casa de las Américas*? Was it, worse still, a direct successor to *Mundo Nuevo* (New World), a defunct journal that had been funded by the CIA-sponsored Congress for Cultural Freedom? The fact that *Libre*’s first issue carried a dossier on the Padilla Affair did little to allay those concerns, which eventually prompted Cortázar—ambivalent about the project from the start—to withdraw in April 1972. He laid out his reasons in a letter to Vargas Llosa, citing ‘the climate of Manicheanism, misunderstandings and other misfortunes of underdevelopment’ while making clear that ‘in no way am I disassociating myself from you as a writer and as a friend’. In his response, Vargas Llosa expressed his sadness while respecting his friend’s decision; but to others he called Cortázar’s letter ‘deplorable’.

Up to this point, the quartet had maintained a friendly tone in their correspondence even as differences opened up between them; but hereafter the letters begin to thin out, and starting in 1974 consist almost entirely of exchanges between Fuentes and Cortázar. In that sense, though *Cartas*’s editors locate the end of the Boom in 1975–76, the personal and political breaches between the four had already been widening for some time. Novelistically, 1975 did mark a shift in approach: as the editors note, Fuentes’s sprawling *Terra nostra*, ‘the most “totalizing” of the novels of the time’, appeared that year, alongside García Márquez’s deliberately hermetic *El otoño del patriarca* (Autumn of the Patriarch). At the same time, the region-wide distribution on which the Boom’s readers and writers depended had effectively been dismantled by the ‘anti-subversive’ mania of the dictatorships. The interpersonal end of the Boom, meanwhile, came in Mexico City on 12 February 1976—the infamous moment when Vargas Llosa punched García Márquez in the face for an alleged impropriety towards Vargas Llosa’s wife. (García Márquez wore the resulting black eye like a badge of honour, grinning from ear to ear in a photograph taken the next day, but only made public in 2007.)

The remainder of the correspondence, covering 1975 to 2012, is mostly rather meagre fare, of interest mainly for showing the continued bond

between Cortázar and Fuentes. After the former's death in 1984 it tails off into brief missives and congratulatory telegrams, ending when Fuentes dies in 2012. García Márquez followed in 2014, with Vargas Llosa surviving them all into an ignominious old age as doyen of the region's ultra-liberal right, until his death in 2025. (One can only imagine what his former friends would have made of his being granted the hereditary noble title of Marquess of Vargas Llosa by the King of Spain in 2011.) *Cartas* concludes with a lengthy set of appendices, reproducing some of the articles and documents referred to in the letters. This includes articles the four wrote about each other's work between 1964 and 1984; an interview given by Cortázar, García Márquez and Fuentes to a Czech literary journal in 1969; and several of the key documents from 1968–71, including the ill-fated letters to Castro as well as other statements signed by some combination of the four. The appendices are a welcome pendant to the main body of the volume, which is itself extensively and informatively annotated, testifying to the considerable editorial work involved.

What kind of history of the Boom, then, emerges from *Cartas*? The choice of the four writers is itself, of course, a strong wager on their continuing canonical status, and in that sense the volume aims to confirm a fairly conventional understanding of the Boom's character and boundaries. But more than that, the selection of this quartet assumes that the interactions between them were integral to the fabric of the Boom itself. On that front, while there is plenty of fascinating material here, the correspondence doesn't fully succeed in making its case. In part this is because any set of letters can only incompletely capture the relationships between senders and recipients: much of the texture of their lives and their various commitments—aesthetic, political, personal—remains outside the first-person epistolary frame. But it's also true that the four were not necessarily each other's most important interlocutors, either in print or in the flesh. Cortázar's correspondence runs to five main volumes plus assorted additional collections; this includes *Cartas a los Jonquières* (2010), comprising over 120 letters to his close childhood friend, the painter Eduardo Jonquières, and Jonquières's wife María, in which Cortázar is more relaxed, less ceremonious than he is with his Boom peers. Fuentes's extensive correspondence with José Donoso, meanwhile, was published in 2025, and is similarly more candid and intimate. It seems likely that the success of the Boom itself and the quartet's self-consciousness of their role in it contributed to a certain loss of openness and spontaneity in their exchanges, which would then have been heightened by personal and political differences.

Over time, indeed, the tenor of *Las cartas del Boom* shifts from cordial exchanges between writerly friends to something more akin to inter-state

diplomacy, reflecting their increasingly grand status as titans of the global novel. In that sense, the entropy of their correspondence is as much a feature of the Boom as the initial closeness between them. Yet by confining themselves to the interactions between these four, are the editors of *Cartas* in fact showing us what was most central to the evolution of the Boom phenomenon as such? The editors might reasonably object that taking another approach—zeroing in on a specific site, period or set of topics, for example, and bringing in a wider network of figures—would have meant sacrificing the conceptual clarity and temporal arc granted by the focus on these four. Still, what emerges from their correspondence is less a Boom-style totalizing narrative than a kind of flickering *Bildungsroman*—a fragmentary chronicle that places us amid the energizing cross-currents between the four, in a period of dramatic social, political and economic transformation for Latin America itself.

Those wider shifts remain strangely offstage in many of their exchanges, despite the awareness each had of how profoundly their writing was shaped by them. As Vargas Llosa put it in an interview with the Soviet journal *Latinskaia Amerika* in 1977:

in the case of fiction one can establish a certain relation between periods of historical crisis, let's say, of great social ferment and the rise of narrative . . . It seems there is a historical period that is ending in Latin America. There is a whole old society that is in a period of decline . . . It is in those ends of historical epochs that the most important narrative totalizations have emerged. I think all of this ensemble, this spread of narrative works of the last few years are above all a projection at the formal, symbolic, artistic level of a world that is ending.

These remarks capture the untimely timeliness of the Boom—the way its repurposing of the techniques of modernism enabled it to give literary expression to the historical vertigo of Latin America's experience of modernization. Of course, in this respect the region bore many similarities with other parts of the world, whether one frames them as emerging from the overlapping of distinct modes of production or as symptoms of combined and uneven development. What made Latin America's Boom possible, however, was a convergence of several additional distinguishing factors: shared regional language, rapidly rising literacy, increasing speed of communications and circulation of ideas and books themselves, all coupled with the coalescence of a collective aesthetic project uniquely geared, in its bid to project itself beyond national traditions and assert a common regional literary identity, to take advantage of this unlikely combination of circumstances.

Yet even at its apparent peak, the wider significance of the Boom and its relation to the historical conjuncture that produced it proved understandably

elusive to its protagonists. In August 1970, Cortázar wrote to Eduardo Jonquières about the one-time convergence of the four Boom writers, the other three arriving at Cortázar's place in Saignon in a rented bus with an extensive retinue of friends and hangers-on. 'It was very pleasant and at the same time very strange', he wrote: 'something outside of time, unrepeatable of course, and with a deep meaning that escapes me yet to which I am sensitive'.