

The Peripheral Center of Postmodernism: On Borges, García Márquez, and Alterity

Carlos Rincón

Recently, Peter Buerger tried, like Lukács before him, to interpret literary modernism by resorting to the Hegelian premise that a double alienation between the subject and the object and between 'man' as an individual and 'man' as a member of a species are basic characteristics of modern (bourgeois) society.¹ Proceeding from this premise, he catalogs the variety of narrative modes in which the subject seeks (unattainably) to become one with surrounding objects. The historico-philosophical foundation of Buerger's investigation assumes the continuity of literary modernity and its Eurocentric determination. Is it possible to ascertain a threshold between the modern and the postmodern at a point where Buerger wants to see nothing but continuity? Or, better, what is the "other" that allows the identity of the postmodern itself—as the recognition of the end of Eurocentrism and Western hegemony—to appear?

Against the horizon of new forms of culture and social reproduction, the art of narrative plays a different role today than it did in the early 1960s, when the term *postmodernism* was introduced for the first time in

1. Peter Buerger, *Prosa der Modern* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1988).

North American literary discussion to characterize novels that sought the de-hierarchization of the modernist separation of elite and mass cultures. A selection of Borges's *Ficciones* (written mainly between 1935 and 1944) was published in English in 1962, coincident with the declaration of "the end of the modern." Foucault invoked Borges a few years later in the preface to *Les Mots et les choses*. And, in short order, the novels of García Márquez, Cortázar, and Fuentes, among others, were rapidly assimilated to the canon of literary postmodernism.

The enthusiastic reception of these Latin American texts by a relatively saturated literary and socioeconomic European–North American modernity also repressed the complex overdeterminations of class, culture, peoples, gender, and history in Latin America's own "uneven" modernity at the end of its most intensive period of growth (1950–1970) and in the midst of its most dramatic crisis in this century. These overdeterminations traverse the relationships to history and power that these texts try to work out and condition their reception and cultural function in Latin America itself. The question I want to raise in this context, however, is not whether the assimilation of Latin American writers such as Borges or García Márquez to the canon of metropolitan postmodernism is a hegemonic reduction of the different to the same; rather, I am interested in how the force of (their) alterity is constitutive of the "postmodern condition" itself, which is precisely the center's loss of its status as such.

In the early 1940s, Borges represented in the "Library of Babel" the modern's ambition in the allegorical figure of an old man on a toilet ("the sedentary librarian") who is playing with the idea of combining the aleatory with the mystical and who hopes to show the hidden order of the universe with his game. I want to tell here the story of the genesis and structure of another Borges story, "Pierre Menard, Author of *Quixote*," which emblematically stands for modern literature (in a sense, for literature as such).

We know from Adolfo Bioy Casares that early in 1939, he intended to write a story with Borges and Silvia Ocampo, which they began but never completed. The basic idea was coined by Borges: A young French provincial writer's attention is drawn to a long-dead writer, whose manuscripts he starts looking for and begins to study. Although the master is famous, at least in some circles, the young writer finds his work insignificant. Finally, he gains access to the unpublished manuscripts and discovers brilliant outlines that were never developed. One that particularly attracts his attention is a catalog of literary rules and prohibitions. Bioy Casares was of the opinion that there was hidden in the catalog the irony of the master's own fate: "The

writer without works, an illustration of the impossibility of writing with absolute clarity." One of the prohibitions, namely to express neither praise nor reproof in a review, was attributed to a certain Menard, who, Bioy Casares explains, is the "hero of 'Pierre Menard, author of *Quixote*;' both the published and the not written stories were invented in the same year, possibly on the same days, for, if I am not mistaken, Borges wrote his 'Pierre Menard' on the afternoon we made up the list of prohibitions."²

The image of Borges as the "modern among the moderns," or the "modern master," as he was called by Paul de Man, is corroborated by many of his activities in the thirties, including his work as editor of the foreign language section of the women's magazine *El Hogar* from 1936–1939. It was here that Borges introduced Joyce and reviewed the latest arrivals by Broch, Mann, Faulkner, Hemingway, Huxley, Babel, Woolf, Larbaud, and Valéry. It is likely that Borges found the literary and hermeneutic model for the "secret work" of Pierre Menard in one of the fragments of Valéry's *Tel Quel*:

The pleasure or the boredom that a book written in 1612 may afford to a reader in 1912 is almost merely accidental. What I want to express by that is that so many and such new circumstances play a role here, which never would have been imagined by even the most sensitive and clear-sighted author of 1612. The books of the past are bathed in today's glory with the same intelligence that is typical of a fire or a worm in a library when destroying this or that one.³

Just before this passage, Valéry introduces a new figure, the "*profiteur* who listens and takes advantage. I give him ideas and he develops and does something with them." What also coincides with the binary opposition between visible work and underground (nonrealizable) work in "Pierre Menard" is Valéry's assessment of the limits of positivistic literary history: Such a project is guided by the "visible work" and cannot take into consideration what happens "inside" the author. The tone of self-irony that inflects the picture of the provincial writer in the unwritten story clearly alludes to such provincials as Borges, Bioy Casares, and Ocampo as they seek to understand, from Argentina, Valéry's work. Paul de Man has pointed out that Borges considers the author's vanishing from the picture he has created as an expression of "poetic greatness." This form of projection also de-

2. Adolfo Bioy Casares, *La otra aventura* (Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, 1983), 181.

3. Paul Valéry, *Oeuvres II* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), 632.

termines the relation between Valéry and Monsieur Teste. What, however, complicates Menard's attempt to rewrite the *Quixote* is that it exists within a framework of relations of "ironies, parodies, reflexes, and prospects."⁴

Modern criticism has deployed two strategies of reterritorialization in relation to "Pierre Menard": an analytical re-Oedipalization of the content of the story, and a reading of the story in terms of the aesthetics of reception. What occurs in the first case is the idea of desire as an interpretation machine with its own inherent code and demands. Thus, we have Oedipus, castration, and familiarization ("killing one's father," "death wish"); death of the father (2 Feb. 1938) when Borges was thirty-eight; growing dependence on the mother due to his loss of eyesight ("incest taboo" and "desire for love"); self-punishment through a severe accident and blood poisoning late in 1938 ("fear of castration" and "fear of punishment"); identification, although on another level, with the writing profession, which his father had not been successful in ("sublimation"—the text of "Pierre Menard, Author of *Quixote*" was published in the journal *Sur* in May 1939). "By attempting to symbolically kill himself, Borges killed the 'ego' that was a reflection of his father. He assumed a new identity [the identity of the author of fantastic texts] after the mythical experience of death and resurrection."⁵

In *Nouvelle Critique's* infancy, Gerard Genette interpreted Borges's story in order to elaborate on the relationship between the work and the reader and on the idea of reading as a form of written work.⁶ More than twenty years after the change of perspective in literary theory that he introduced had resulted in a new draft for a historical theory of aesthetic experience, Hans Robert Jauss read "Pierre Menard" as an enactment of the literary process that leads from the aging of the modern into the postmodern. "Pierre Menard" elucidates, in particular, the starting point of reception aesthetics: Things that are repeated have no identity as time goes by.⁷

I do not intend to pursue these modern or modernist readings any further; rather, I wish to elaborate on how "Pierre Menard" is *different*, and on how it thus outlines a different way to read Latin American texts, because the structural features of their narrative apparatus, as well as their discontinuous and heterogeneous formal processes and their hybrid genre

4. Paul de Man, "A Modern Master," *New York Review of Books* (March 1964), 9.

5. Emir Rodríguez Monegal, *Borges: Una biografía literaria* (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1987), 296.

6. Gerard Genette, *Palimpsestes* (Paris: Seuil, 1982), 325.

7. Hans Robert Jauss, "Die Theorie der Rezeption—Rückshau auf ihre unerkannte Vorgeschichte," unpublished typescript, 18–20.

specification, tend to go in other directions, directions that point to a historically specific, changed matrix for experience.

After the Great Depression, in the thirties, Argentine society entered a rapid process of industrialization. With the arrival on the scene of new social factors, changing values, and new demands, traditional sociocultural facts and ways of life were robbed of their strength. The systems previously underlying the exchange of goods and information gradually lost control. Culturally, this resulted in changes brought about by the rapid urbanization of consciousness and the restructuring of social communication via the mass media. Relationships to power that were frozen or blocked gave way to a mobile field of power relations where populism could find fertile soil. The "downfall" of Europe, as experienced by the crisis-stricken periphery, was added to the problem of looking at the future directly into the sun. The individual's conscious understanding of society became badly shaken, so that each individual world was experienced as unreliable and transitory in the sudden pluralization of the social environment.

The specific form of the crisis of Argentine culture, art, and literature in this context was not that of "modernity": that is, the experience of the anomie of modern life or the need for a compensatory aesthetic counter-world by the now unsure of itself bourgeois subject. Parallel to changes in the sociocultural system of reproduction introduced by the mass media and mass-produced and spread images was the development of ambivalent art works, such as Borges's story, which do not involve a descriptive reproduction of reality, which unfold within imaginary settings and times and relate to an intermediate level of reference: a reality of images and collective symbols as the basic screens for perception. Borges was a great consumer of detective stories and Hollywood movies, but neither of these could fulfill for him the "modern" function of a reconciliation between the discursive and the associative, between soul and world. In "Pierre Menard," the reader is expected not only to take part in producing and developing meaning but also to play within and with the limits of the artificial, but possible, world and with the real world as a reference.

Moreover, the textual dynamics of "Pierre Menard" refer to a life of the unconscious that does not correspond with the role of the classical Oedipal triangle in modern society, but rather to the empirical features of an economy based on desire. Oedipus—"a colonization that has been carried out by different means" (Deleuze and Guattari)—is the internal colony. Dreams of colonized peoples show that desire is more important than anything the society can convey through parents or anything that happens

in the family triangle: The unconscious runs rampant throughout society.⁸ Once desire is set in motion, it connects and binds itself to other desires, constantly presupposing and producing processes of delimitation and re-coding. What dominates in Borges's "The Garden of Forking Paths" (1941), and signals the end of the fantastic as a possibility of narration, is not the alienation between subject and object nor the modern strategy for the stabilization of the ego through repression, nor even Oedipus, but rather a now happy schizophrenia that plays with systems, including writing, and re-organizes logocentric narrative structures by means of a narrator-authority that constantly shifts from authorial discourse to narrative action. Calvino found that in "Pierre Menard," Borges succeeded in inventing himself as a narrator:

He found the egg of Columbus which made it possible for him to escape from his block that kept him (he was forty) from switching over from trivial prose to narrative prose because he acted as if the book he intended to write had already been written by another unknown author, an author from another language circle or another culture, and as if he wanted to plagiarize, summarize, and review just this hypothetical book.⁹

In a review of Valéry's "Introduction à la Poétique," Borges unravels the paradox in the two approaches to literature he finds in Valéry: that the history of literature is the history of the intellect as the producer and the consumer of literature, and that the works of the intellect only exist in the reader's here and now. Borges considers that, with the simultaneous discovery of literary narrative's process of arching over everything (Joyce) and the challenge to its autonomy by the mass media, it is now possible to establish paradox as a law of the universe. The idea of modernism might be sufficient to characterize the unwritten story planned by Borges-Bioy Casares-Ocampo, with its ironization of literary practice and literary life, but it would not be enough to master the multiple coding of "Pierre Menard" and the radical heterogeneity of its inherent problems. Pierre Menard is able to write the *Quixote* although it already existed, which is to say that the existence of the imaginary does not presuppose, for Borges, the category of the subject. There is no pre-existent identical subject. He considers

8. See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Capitalisme et Schizofrenie: L'Anti-Oedipe* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1972), 209–16.

9. Italo Calvino, *Sei proposte per il prossimo millennio* (Turin: Einaudi, 1988), 49.

the subject an essential consequence of discourse: a (collective) chain of assertions. Jauss has underlined that Derrida's deconstruction of logocentrism does not go beyond "Pierre Menard" in this sense. Geoffrey Hartman similarly states in his characterization of Derrida's "philosophical antimask," that for him, Derrida is "in line with Mallarmé and, *nolens volens*, a cousin of Borges's."¹⁰ What Borges is asking is how the fictitious reality of the "individual" is thinkable and what (indispensable) values are linked with the real fiction of the "individual" under conditions where the autonomous (modern) subject comes into crisis.

Borges is an intruder in Euro-American modernism in the sense of a cultural *extopia* of a peripheral marginality, of a modernity that is not yet and never will be completed. The hermeneutics of the Yale Critics, or Genette, or John Barth, represent a "completed" modernity that represses the experience of the other in order to domesticate it. This is what, in a different context, the modern liberal imagination of Conrad, Foster, and Camus did with what frequently was an ontologically given other, but not a historically concrete one. What is different in Borges's fiction is a historical (and political) dimension that goes beyond the strategies of the modern: the fact that the primacy of the original (*Don Quixote*) and the hierarchy of metropolis and periphery, model and copy, have been overcome. From this "misplaced" perspective, it is possible for him to turn the concept of culture upside down in a labyrinth game and to measure the existing system of the established culture against the logic of the non-place and the paradox. The refusal of Telos in the face of philosophy of history coincides with a self-reflexivity that is no longer bound to the anthropocentric tradition of Enlightenment.

This brings me to another narrative in which the problem of the subject's constitution is also placed in the foreground. It deals with the erection of a building, a "crypt," and it is begun over and over again in García Márquez's writing. Each new circle of the narrative starts its task anew to find out what is hidden in the event and to determine its importance. This involves the staging of a (the original) scene that includes, each time, other subjects, name-bearers, and places. The story is textualized in a local artifact, in an enclave—a crypt—that is isolated from public space so that "things"—a body—can be embedded in it. What the endurance of this artifact and its contents evidences is the violence of the conflict created by the tension of libidinous desire there. One could say that Thanatopoetic lust

10. Geoffrey Hartman, *The Fate of Reading* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), x.

starts up the machinery of the narrative, mobilizing mimetic power and illusion in order to conceal and protect what is in the crypt. Let me use three examples of the story in García Márquez's novels *Leaf Storm*, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, and *Love in the Time of Cholera* to demonstrate its cryptic structure as a kind of given, but eternally lost, text that is continually being made over in something like a transferential process of remembering and reworking.

In *Leaf Storm*, a child, his mother, and the colonel who is the child's grandfather stand in front of a dead man in a room that is usually kept locked. The dead man is the colonel's friend, who hung himself the night before. The colonel prepares everything for the funeral, as he promised his friend he would, in spite of the indignation of the inhabitants of Macondo. The dead man's identity—he was a French physician who turned up there one day presenting the colonel with a letter of recommendation—had always remained mysterious and the subject of conjecture. As in *Antigone*, which is the novel's referent, a curse hangs over Macondo, which may bring about its apocalyptic destruction. The incapacity of the inhabitants of Macondo to understand themselves and their situation goes hand in hand with the fact that it is impossible for them to recognize the stranger as the other and as one of their own kind (this incapacity could be read as their inability to know or "decipher"). The closed interior of the locked room represents the first textualization of the crypt that preserves a dead man (who is revived by the narrative).

The theme of the other, the double, and the crypt also runs through *One Hundred Years of Solitude* from the first page on. García Márquez's text connects the novel with the epic under the sign of myth. It carnivalizes narration. The imagination is the power of recollection and the plan of the future; fiction becomes the acquisition of history. The persistence of sexual endogamy and of the failure to establish a relationship with the other brings the constant possibility of the return of a crypt and the body preserved in it. Melquíades, the gypsy, the stranger, the first one to die and be buried in Macondo, enjoys a special relationship with the founding patriarch. He is, consistent with the theme of the double, the cofounder of Macondo. The room in which he lives and writes his chronicle splits the system of place that the house of the Buendía, which has been erected both to keep a dead man alive and to bury him, represents. In the enclave of the room, which is isolated from the course of time, time itself becomes a spatial interior. Here is where Melquíades takes down the cryptic manuscripts containing Macondo's many generations of hallucinatory history before they can

be decoded in the middle of the apocalyptic catastrophe at the end and thus become the book we are reading. The crypt develops into a forum in which Macondo's fate and its inhabitants' incapacity to know themselves are discussed; it is the place that preserves a "living" dead man.

In *Love in the Time of Cholera*, the crypt is on the opening page itself. In order to make it possible to tell the story, the cryptic mechanism and its economy of desire must be set in motion, and the hermetically sealed room of the photographer Jeremiah de Saint-Amour must be established as the crypt. This stranger, who originally came from the French Antilles, arrived one day in Cartagena and became a protégé of the physician Juvenal Urbino. On the day before the story opens, he commits suicide with potassium cyanide. His name in Spanish is "Santo Amore," holy love. Jeremiah de Saint-Amour, in his own way, personifies the "*vita nuova*," the way of life of the other and the secret that allows each day the resurrection in this world of postmodern tupidity and modern ravages of life for those who condemn the masters of power to nonexistence.

From a psychoanalytic point of view, the text is a "poorly closed" crypt, which hides and reveals at the same time. The crypt itself is the "monument of a catastrophe," which presupposes an initial (hypothetical) trauma and, retrospectively, a reconstruction of its scenography and scene. Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok have worked out the general premises and communication patterns for this in their interpretation of Freud's case of the Wolf-Man. They take off from the recognition that the scene of the Wolf-Man's trauma "with all its libidinous force and 'contradictions' is enclosed in the crypt."¹¹ As a result of denied or impossible grief, the never completed cryptic enclosure takes place at the boundary line that separates internalization and incorporation from one another and contrasts one with the other. The crypt is between the "dynamic unconscious" and the "ego of the internalization," which is in the middle of the ego's general area of space. For in the inner ego, the enclave (of all internalizations) is surrounded by the crypt, which is a general space of incorporation. Incorporation into the ego embodies an economic answer to traumatic object loss. It is this "incorporated object," then, that the ego uses to identify itself.¹²

11. Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, *Kryptonimie: Des Verbarium des Wolfsmanns* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1979), 10.

12. Derrida comments, in his foreword to the Abraham-Torok book: "Such a maneuver is alien to the internalization process and, strictly speaking, is against it. I act as if I absorb the dead person, alive, intact, 'not damaged' (eviscerated), in order to be able to deny myself in a necessarily ambiguous way my being able to love him, as in the internalization

García Márquez has often referred to the fact that he was raised from birth by his grandparents in a house with many women and numerous servants, among whom were two male Indian and one female Indian, Memé. He first met his mother when he was five and went to live with his parents when he was eight. When he was five, a man known as Don Emilio committed suicide in Aracataca by swallowing potassium cyanide. Don Emilio was a disabled war veteran, a Belgian goldsmith, and a friend of his grandfather's, Colonel Nicolás Ricardo Márquez Mejída. Don Emilio and the colonel spent hours on end playing checkers. Don Emilio killed himself after seeing the film *All Quiet on the Western Front* with the colonel and the young García Márquez at the local cinema. This is the same film Jeremiah and Urbino see in *Love in the Time of Cholera*. There is another parallel: Urbino misses Sunday Mass, as Colonel Márquez had to, when he buried Don Emilio's remains in the cemetery for suicides. Three years later, after García Márquez had started living with his parents, his grandfather died under similar circumstances as Juvenal Urbino does in the novel. The boy experienced this loss without showing any clear signs of grief; although only eight years old, he experienced that grief is impossible.

This is as far as my "paleontological" reconstruction of the narrative crypt, taking its hypothetical character for granted, goes. García Márquez's constructions form the links in a mnemonic chain, whose energy and intensity make it possible for secrecy and mystery, irony, ceremony, and imagination (the source of the poetic changes that come to work in them) to become manifest. It is obvious that none of these narrative crypts is able to reproduce the original crypt, so that the chain is an infinite one with a dynamism driving toward the next link, the next novel, or the retelling of the story in the form of an (auto)biography. But this would also mean that García Márquez unveils his "secret" in order to hide it even better. Nothing can close the crypt; its contents are inexhaustible (utopian) and libidinous.

One can read in this project a historically conditioned and situation-specific psychogenesis of the (de-centered) subject and its structural illusions that deviates from the metropolitan logic of the modern. From its very

process of so-called 'normal' grief when the dead person is a living part in me in an undamaged—eviscerated—way. . . . [T]his helpless (progressive, slow, difficult, mediated, effective) internalization process loses ground to incorporation, which is phantasmic, unexpected, sudden, magic, and sometimes hallucinatory. . . . No doubt, the ego, in order to resist the internalization process, identifies itself in an obscure and imaginary way with the lost object and its 'life beyond the grave.' No doubt, this endocryptic identification . . . remains phantasmic, cryptomatic" (13–17).

beginning, the interrelations in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* oscillate between the present, past, and future; life and death; and the real and the imaginary. As such, they differ from Oedipal desire and the bourgeois ego's subject effect, which occurs either as a nomadic center of action that eliminates subjectivity in favor of individuality or produces an alienated subject marked by anomie, fear of existence, and private revolt, whose modern literary form is the *Bildungsroman*. What the composition of Macondo as a chronicle (*crónica*) presupposes, instead, is a global view of overlapping cultures and time periods. This makes it possible for García Márquez to articulate Latin America's history in a form that goes beyond the *grand récits* of Enlightenment, the phenomenology of self, and the philosophy of history.

What characterizes García Márquez's fiction is that it links "chronicle" with a massive unfolding of the unconscious's primary processes. Once experience has been made visible, objectivized, in narrative, any imaginary and affective contents encountered along the way can be used to describe things and ideas, opposites can be juxtaposed, and subjectivity's official boundaries can be tested and crossed. This narrative treatment of primary psychic processes involves, like "Pierre Menard," a reaction to the new logics of mass culture, tuned to the structural needs and desires of a (secondary) narcissism that requires an egotistical (fickle and individualistic) satisfaction.¹³ There is a difference between the subject effect in García Márquez's fictions and the dismantled, distraught (de-Oedipalized) subject found in novels such as Barth's *Sabbatical* and Robert Coover's *Gerald's Party*, or in the inhabitants of Pynchon's San Narciso. García Márquez's "meta-fictions" typologically resemble the North American post-modern texts. But the interpretative challenge that they represent is more complex.

Let me illustrate this in the following way: Brian McHale uses the confrontation between worlds in postmodern fiction to prove his theory that pastiche has an ontological character, unlike modernist collage. He draws on *One Hundred Years of Solitude* to recall the fact that the inhabitants of Macondo accept supernatural things and events as real but react to everything that is banal and everyday with surprise. Their reaction occurs under a complete reversal of signs:

In Macondo, not only is the fantastic banal but because of a kind of chiasmus, the banal also becomes fantastic. The dialogue between

13. Stuart Ewen, "Mass Culture, Narcissism and the Moral Economy of War," *Telos* 44 (1980): 77.

the normal and the paranormal continues, in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, although their relative positions have been reversed. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is still a fantastic text, despite—or indeed because of—its banalization of the fantastic.¹⁴

What bothers me here is not only the terminological and conceptual vagueness, nor the validity of categories such as the banal, paranormal, and fantastic, nor the question of how the imaginary and the real are organized and what desire and reality are in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Rather, it is the occlusion of the importance of combined and uneven development in the production and sociocultural relevance of the text's effects. From an epistemological point of view, there has been a clear degradation of the unusual, which puts Macondo's sense of provable reality into question so that, although Macondo is far from the modern disenchantment of magic, products of modern civilization have still been introduced to it through the enclave economy. The reaction of Macondo's inhabitants, however, is unlike that of inhabitants of societies that are dominated by technical, economic, and administrative rationality. The miracles that happen in Macondo—the ascension of Remedios the Beautiful or the levitation of Father Nicanor—are dealt with within the context of social knowledge, whereas the wonders of technology—the gramophone, movies, and the telephone—put reality's boundaries to the test and, as such, are a danger to the mental integrity of the inhabitants and the community. Therefore, the narrative articulation of epistemological crisis as it exists in Macondo, even though it connects with similar changes in production, in communication, and, consequently, in perception, cannot be compared with an epistemology such as Pynchon's, which is founded upon a denial of causality and of the modern's chronological teleology. Because of its situation-bound difference, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* articulates an epic, carnival-like critique of reason, which must be assessed parallel to, but independent of, the philosophical critique of instrumental reason, the psychoanalytic and semiotic critique of the subject, and radical skepticism about the validity of great narratives in the metropolis.

It is perhaps appropriate to mention at this juncture Habermas's claim that the (Western) model of modernity is the only valid, "reasonable" social structure. The claim is founded on the assumption that Western rationalism, and thus the possibility of communicative rationality, has been realized

14. Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (New York and London: Routledge, 1987), 76–77.

and generalized by modernization and by the dissolution of magic in the world.¹⁵ The functions of the premises used by Habermas became clear in the twenty-year discussion on development and underdevelopment, and on the limits of European and American modernization theories and their counterarguments, the theories of structural dependency. Richard Morse has shown that instrumental reason—that is, the “objective” intellectualization of the world—has not been fully internalized yet in Latin America and that society is still understood by the individual as a structural exterior.¹⁶ Today, the simultaneous occurrence of things that are not simultaneous has come to mean in Latin America a peripheral modernization, in which the dissolution of magic in the world is not going to be decisive. In the history of Latin America, which has its own version of the West’s history, the function of the concept of the modern has been changed. Just as “wild” capitalism lacks institutional mechanisms for normative integration and social engineering, the processes of differentiation and individualization in Latin America and the trend toward secularization have been shifted onto historically concrete situations of dependence. Latin America is not only “partially modern,” it seems also to belong to three historical worlds at once, and it is legitimate to ask whether its identity can be plotted on any abstract time line.

Habermas’s critique of postmodernist architecture leads to an apology for the modern’s linking of form and function. Just as his concept of communicative rationality ignores the colonization of the public sphere and the unconscious by the electronic mass media, his insistence on function(alism) ignores its history in the periphery. Urbanistics is the field par excellence in which the fate of the modern’s project in Latin America can be observed. The utopian urge of the modern inspired Le Corbusier’s plans for the reconstruction of Buenos Aires and Bogotá. The impossibility of modernizing misery he encountered theoretically is as instructive for the paradoxes of the modern and of its loss of authority in the periphery as the failure of the city of Brasília. Even more symptomatic of the crisis brought on by modernist urbanistics is the immediate future of the megalopolis of São Paulo, which will have 26 million inhabitants by the millennium and will virtually have grown into Rio de Janeiro over a 400 kilometer chain of satellite towns. (Parallel to this are the disastrous interventions in the ecosystem of

15. Jürgen Habermas, *Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1985), 9.

16. Richard Morse, *El espejo de Prospero* (Mexico: Siglo XXI, 1982), 178.

the Amazon rain forest or the development of Latin American narcotics into one of the most flourishing industries of the subcontinent and of the world.)

The concept of difference in relation to Latin American cultural production becomes relevant if one takes into consideration that the obstacles that have to be overcome to thematize it are as great as those involved in "wild anthropology." This is evident in the ongoing debate in literary studies at American universities about "emerging literatures" and related questions of field and canon formation. It was in order to intervene in this debate that Jameson published his now famous essay on Third World literature. Particularly interesting is the way he uses there the categories of identity and difference in order to consider the relationship between First and Third World literatures. In a Hegelian tour de force, Jameson reduces the heterogeneity of Third World literature to a single exclusive dimension, the "experience of colonialism and imperialism," which still has not been recognized in the metropolis. It follows that "all texts from the Third World necessarily . . . are national allegories," where the process of allegory formation is understood as a relation between the private and the public, the individual and the collective, and history of the individual and history of the "tribe."¹⁷

In Latin America, where the nation-state was used as a lever by capitalist modernization and where the dream of a modernized democratic state has been thwarted, the role of nationalism as a legitimizing ideology is openly challenged today by literary theory and criticism and by those social and political movements that have developed on the periphery of hegemonic "national" projects. Instead, the appreciation of traditions and the mingling of cultural levels in Latin American literature find their parallel in the hybridization of different genres. Neither the concepts of the national and the allegorical nor the exclusiveness of colonial and imperialist experience exhaust the possibilities of the heterogeneity of Latin American fiction. The specific features of these texts resist being represented by interpretations such as Jameson's, which repress, and thus deny, their difference.

In tandem with the idea of "national allegory," Jameson has introduced the concept of "magic realism" into the debate about the postmodern.¹⁸ To my mind, this concept, which was originally intended to counter the epistemology of social realist narrative, has not served, from the very beginning, to determine a clearly defined aesthetic problem. The controversial

17. Fredric Jameson, "Third World Literature in the Era of Multi-National Capitalism," *Social Text* 15 (1986): 69.

18. Fredric Jameson, "On Magic Realism in Film," *Critical Inquiry* 12 (1986): 301-32.

versions of its history by Roberto González Echevarría and Emir Rodríguez Monegal that Jameson refers to were broken off in the early 1970s, and the concept itself was nearly completely abandoned by literary studies as impractical. It did, however, become increasingly popular with the authors themselves and with their readers. In particular, the massive reception of García Márquez and Borges made it an international literary phenomenon. Magic realist novels blossom in literature from peripheral Soviet republics, in Commonwealth literature, in French-speaking African and Caribbean literature, in the United States, and in Western Europe.

In spite of what he admits are the concept's "terminological confusions," Jameson lets himself be led astray by its "power of temptation" as "a possible alternative to the narrative logic of the contemporary postmodern" (302). From the "first world's point of view . . . as opposed to the Latin American conception," and with a "private and personal" treatment, Jameson analyzes three features he considers "fundamental for a certain magic realism" in three films: *Cóndores no entierran todos los días* (1984, Columbia), *La Casa de Agua* (1984, Venezuela), and *Fever* (1981, Poland). These features are: (1) their particularity as historical films; (2) the fact that color is used in them as a source of fascination for its own sake, as a supplement to the narrative; (3) their concentration, reduction, and simplification of the narrative itself through violence (or eroticism) "for the sake of watching or viewing in the cinematic present."

Jameson differentiates magic realist and postmodernist handling of film color and relations between visual and narrative dynamics. His first "very provisional hypothesis" is that magic realism depends on "a kind of historic raw material" that "shows the overlapping or parallel existence of pre-capitalist and just developing capitalist or technological features" (311). In Latin American criticism of the sixties, the thesis that entire strata of the past are arranged in the present in layers, one upon the other, and that Latin American society, like any other historical society, consists of an overlapping of such layers and of the coexistence of various modes of production without one dominant mode was common. The problem here is that everything and nothing was explained by this idea. According to Jameson, research into internal and structural psychic distances by means of the movie camera and the development of "new forms of relationships to being" in magic realist films are only possible because they contain "a new type of historicism," in which the historical experience of de-centering has stopped being accidental. He concludes that there is a necessary and fundamental relation between the "intensities of colors and bodies in these

films and their process of de-narrativization" that proves to be a process of "ideological analysis and deconstruction" (323). It is exactly in this aesthetic tension between expressivity and narration that Jameson identifies magic realism in film.

I have two questions here: If Jameson is trying to show magic realist film as a possible alternative to the narrative logic of metropolitan postmodernism, would it then be possible, *mutatis mutandis*, to develop a similar hypothesis on the level of prose fiction? And, if so, isn't there an ideological short circuit in supposing that North American postmodernist fiction—and I am thinking not only of historical novels such as Doctorow's or political novels such as *The Public Burning* but also of Pynchon's texts—is as distant from a new kind of historicism as Jameson thinks? Today, there is both an epistemological candor that is questioning history as a narrative fiction with formal coherence (Hayden White), and a new ability to make fiction an essential means of cognition in a reality considered as discourse and construct. There is a de-centered, and de-centering, relationship toward history in the works of Borges and García Márquez that I have been discussing, or in testimonio. These texts are part of a counter-narration that qualifies the Western modern's stories of Enlightenment and historical teleology. They correspond to a change in what is called historical consciousness and contribute to the constitution of a historical conception of history. They make it possible, therefore, to historicize the postmodern itself. Their alterity as narrative extopias contains in a way McHale does not consider a political dimension that is related to their ability to criticize the center from the periphery.

The real issue, however, is not the alternative of postmodernism or magic realism but differences that may be perceived outside of such categories as identity, analogy, and opposition. The only way to describe Latin American fiction's place within the context of such a historicized postmodernity and the now mutated concept of "World" literature is as a peripheral center in a situation where centers have multiplied by themselves and have become sites of autonomous creativity, in contrast to a model in which the periphery was thought to mark both the distance from, and subordination to, the center.

This is how to think the relation between, for example, Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (influenced by Borges) and García Márquez's *Love in the Time of Cholera*: Both are "love stories," but with a difference. Pynchon says that he shares with García Márquez a view of "fiction as a subversive medium," and that the two of them play "this high form of the game we ap-

preciate in fiction." He praises *Love in the Time of Cholera* as only novelists writing about themselves can do:

Let us assume that it were not only possible to swear eternal love but to keep the promise in reality—to live a long, meaningful, and authentic life on the basis of such pledge, to invest the granted share of valuable time in the matter we set our hearts on. This is the extraordinary premise of Gabriel García Márquez's new novel. It dares to suggest that lovers' oaths given on the supposition that man is immortal—for many a juvenile idiocy—may, nevertheless, be rewarded . . . at a much later date in life. This is to effectively explain the resurrection of the body, an unavoidable revolutionary idea today. . . . [We have arrived] on the shore of a Caribbean . . . plagued by a history that has killed so terribly many people without their ever having said a word, or they spoke, disappeared without being heard, or they were heard but nothing was written down. Writing in a revolutionary and good way is the duty to break the silence.¹⁹

The history of means-to-end rationality has displaced imagination time and again. Today, the imaginative way of thinking, which was given new value by romanticism, and then surrealism, has begun to correct rationalism's self-expansion. This new turn of mind emphasizes the qualitative mutation that the electronic mass media have created with their upgrading of the imaginary and their inclusion of fiction in the production cycle of commodities and images. Pynchon's characters call themselves Benny Profane and Oedipa Maas, Genghis Con, and Herbert Stencil, Jr. They are designed to be clichés. In their modern industrial world, there are indications of a great plot: the "Tristerosystem," which is a secret society of the downtrodden and injured that has been waging guerrilla warfare against the prevailing order since the Middle Ages. But this is still something like the strategy of a critical—or compensatory—modernity.

Characters from the Caribbean world of *Love in the Time of Cholera*, on the other hand, are called, for example, Florentino and Urbino. Their aura is taken from the living models of the perfect courtier and courtly love in the *Divine Comedy*, where the ideal is to be faithful to only one woman, the one in whom love has condensed and who leads to divine love, the *vita nuova*, models put into practice in Urbino's little princely court, or in

19. Thomas Pynchon, "The Heart's Eternal Vow," *New York Times Book Review* 93 (1988), 1, 47, 49.

Castiglioni's *Courtier*, which is a (textual) utopia of love. In Tuscany, the "Cavaliere d'Amore" and the "Fideli d'Amore"—one of them may have been the Florentine Dante—entered into an alliance, a cross between a militia and a heretical sect, under the name of "Santo Amore" and the cult of "Donna Unica."

It is probably emblematic that both *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Love in the Time of Cholera* cannot come to a conclusion. The multi-coding of the rainbow in Pynchon's novel can be compared with the boat trip upstream and downstream at the end of García Márquez's novel, which returns to the same image that it began with: two elderly people standing on board a boat. What happens to the Newtonian cosmic system in *Gravity's Rainbow* happens also to the courtly love life-style models in *Love in the Time of Cholera* at the beginning of the modern era. The love paradigm of "Santo Amore" turns into a private male fantasy, which is contrasted to the public ecological catastrophe. The double movement of remembering and working through, which Lyotard refers to as the task of the postmodern ("réécrire la modernité"), can be found in both García Márquez and Pynchon. Both compose elements of resistance to a cultural hegemony whose containment strategies have not worked for them. García Márquez's reading of modernity, however, puts it, and Pynchon's novel as well, into a differently conceived historical constellation.

In Carlos Fuentes's novel *Cristobal no nato*, three caravels land in 1992 on the western coast of Mexico, the country with the largest city in the world. This time, however, they come from the East, from Japan. It has become evident, since the 1970s, that the Pacific is becoming one of the major poles of economic power in the world. Europe—that is, the Mediterranean maritime basin—was the economic and cultural center of the early modern world system. In the seventeenth century, the center shifted to the north and to the Atlantic Ocean; today, to the Pacific Basin. Latin American novels' characteristics of discovery and recognition make it possible to use them, not only in Latin America, to decode one's own historical and political experience and the phenomenon of reality's fictionalization. Of course, the logic of the social and cultural world is an open one of "effects not desired," as Pierre Bourdieu has shown. But recognition of the alterity of Latin American fiction shows a way to experience the alien and its differentness so that the historical question of the other, and the discovery (of the history) of the other, which the modern never took upon itself, need not be evaded any longer.

1 page(s) will be printed. ◀Back

Record: 1

Title: The peripheral center of postmodernism: On Borges, Garcia Marquez, and alterity .

Subject(s): LATIN American literature; POSTMODERNISM (Literature)

Author(s): Rincon, Carlos

Source: boundary 2, Fall93 Special Issue, Vol. 20 Issue 3, p162, 18p

Abstract: Examines postmodernism in Latin American literature. Peter Buerger's interpretation of literary modernism; 'Pierre Menard, Author of Quixote' by Borges; Gabriel Garcia Marquez's 'One Hundred Years of Solitude' and 'Love in the Time of Cholera'; Jurgen Habermas's critique of postmodernist architecture; Fredric Jameson's 'magic realism'; Alterity as constitutive of the 'postmodern condition.'

AN: 9405110426

ISSN: 0190-3659

Database: Academic Search Elite