The irresistibility of the Canon

Review Essay: The Irresistibility of the Canon


Taken together these three single-author studies remind us of the persistence of a (male-dominated) canon of twentieth-century Latin American literature. After so much has been written about Borges, García Márquez Rulfo, these collections seek to convince us that there is still something (much?) left to be said. Or, at the very least, and to use Bell-Villada’s words, that there are some “truths that bear being told more than once” (xi). In so doing, these books, and others like them, raise the question of whether criticism can, or should, keep the interest in these authors alive for another generation.

Gabriel García Márquez in Retrospect, edited by one of the foremost critics of García Márquez, Gene Bell-Villada, is one of a number of recent publications that looks at the Colombian author’s oeuvre but it is perhaps the first since his death in 2014. Other examples include: Gerald Martin, The Cambridge Introduction to Gabriel García Márquez (Cambridge University Press, 2012); Philip Swanson, editor, The Cambridge Companion to Gabriel García Márquez (Cambridge University Press, 2010); and Raymond L. Williams, A Companion to Gabriel García Márquez (Tamesis, 2013). The recent opening of the archives at the University of Texas, Austin can only serve to add to this list. The dedication reads “To all Gabo fans, everywhere,” and the editor’s passion for his subject which through in the Introduction. The observation that the first print run of Cien años de soledad sold out in a month reminds us that one reason we may return to the same texts time and again is because of the pleasure they bring us. Aside from the enjoyment many readers derive from reading Márquez’s work, several chapters in the volume also offer passing hints about the keys to his success and the now all too familiar processes which play a part in the canonization of an author. Nicholas Birns and Juan E. De Castro, in a chapter exploring Gabo’s legacy, for example, note the array of literary prizes he won including, of course, the Nobel Prize for Literature but, they also observe, that he and “his disciple Isabel Allende” were the only Latin American authors to be included in Oprah Winfrey’s “popular canon” created through Oprah’s Book Club (4).

Unsurprisingly, most contributions tend towards confirming the significance of García Márquez in the context of Latin American and even world literature. References to the author’s “quasi-mythical status across Latin America” and the like are not uncommon and occasionally tend towards the hyperbolic (Bell-Villada xxii). The reader of this volume is certainly is encouraged
not to underestimate García Márquez’s significance as, for example, when Birns and De Castro present a most interesting argument that the creation of Macondo legitimized Anglophone authors to introduce new places into their fiction which would not otherwise have been considered worthy of a place in fiction.

As I have suggested elsewhere, the practice of creating literary genealogies is another way in which authors are incorporated into canons. Thus, Edith Grossman, the translator of García Márquez’s works into English, takes the reader on an exciting, fast-paced trip through the centuries tracing “a line of influence, acquired by means of translated books, that runs from Miguel de Cervantes to William Faulkner to Gabriel García Márquez” (41). She places García Márquez’s name alongside other “greats” of world literature.

In the context of so much praise, Héctor Hoyos’ chapter stands out as a useful counterpoint. Indeed, we would do well to apply Hoyos’ astute remarks on the negative effects of canonization to our considerations of other canonical authors. Hoyos begins by noting that: “Homage can be trite, and institutionalization stultifying” (103). In order to avoid the pitfalls of consecration whereby “Canonization shares the values emblazoned in the Real Academia’s coat of arms: ‘limpia, fija, y da esplendor’” we need to unlearn what we know and approach with fresh eyes or, as he puts it, approach the texts in the same way as the characters in the opening chapter of Cien años approach ice (Hoyos 109). For Hoyos, this means exploring César Aira and Fernando Vallejo’s more irreverent responses to the Colombian author. Hoyos is not calling on us to cast canonical authors aside. Rather, he cautions us to avoid “commonplaces,” “to unlearn what we think we know and to read [the authors] more thoroughly” (112), “to resituate, rather than to exceptionalize” (113).

Although, as Hoyos points out, there is an established narrative surrounding García Márquez’s “ascent to literary glory,” the volume does strike some balance in its treatment of the author’s extensive and wide-ranging oeuvre (107). Thus, it is divided into four parts, “Oeuvre, Background, Legacy,” “Re-reading the History of Macondo,” “Later Works” and “Other Genres, Other Media.” As well as the aforementioned chapters by Birns and De Castro and Grossman, the first part contains chapters by Regina Janes, who analyzes death and politics as they intermingle the fictional and the autobiographical. Translation is an issue again in “García Márquez and Mamagallismo.” Here, a mistranslation in the English version of Los funerales de la mamá grande inspires Marcela Velasco’s use of the polysemous concept of mamagallismo as a lens through which to understand Márquez’s writings. The result is to locate García Márquez firmly within Colombian and specifically the Baranquilla and Greater Magdalena context whilst also recognizing the role the author played in disseminating “the practice and attitude of mamagallismo through his work” (60).

Part II is devoted to re-readings of Cien años. Bell-Villada, who is also responsible for the fine translations of some of the other chapters, sets the record straight on the “rigorous and consistent” naming conventions in the novel and outlines characteristics shared by characters with the same name (75).
In her chapter on the blindness experienced by Úrsula as a form of enlightenment, María del Mar López-Cabrales suggests that *One Hundred Years of Solitude* continues to be so widely read because “From every nook and cranny [...] something surprising comes our way” (78). As critics, like other readers, continue to be surprised by the works of canonical authors they continue to produce criticism, make new connections and confirm the canonical status in a self-perpetuating circle that, depending on your point of view, is vicious in the way it keeps the focus of our attention on a select few authors/texts, or virtuous in that it allows us to return time and again reliving the pleasure with new insights added each time.

As new critical approaches emerge so too do they offer us opportunities to reread canonical texts. The potential of such revisitings is well illustrated by William Flores’ chapter analyzing the “ecological consciousness” of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, as well as by a number of essays in Pol Popovic Karl’s study of Rulfo (89).

Parts IV and IV of the Márquez retrospective focus on later fiction and other genres and media aiming to capture the full range of García Márquez’s outputs. Michael Wood and Olivia Vázquez-Medina produce insightful readings of *El General en su laberinto* and *Of Love and Other Demons*. The other two chapters by Rubén Pelayo and Fernando Valerio-Holguín focus on the short stories with the former reminding us of Bell-Villada’s assessment that even without the publication of his novels García Márquez would still have had a place in literary history. In a similar vein, a second chapter on *Of Love and Other Demons* by Ignacio López-Calvo opens with an argument for revisiting this novel in particular in order to recognize the contribution that García Márquez made to Spanish-language humorous fiction. Whilst Hoyos reminds us not to overvalue texts, these chapters point to the disservices that can be done when texts which might otherwise merit more attention are overshadowed by an author’s single “masterpiece.”

In Part IV, Robert L. Sims invites us to disregard the boundaries between the different genres to which García Márquez contributed as he presents a convincing argument for seeing *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* as “an experiment in autobiography” that drew on García Márquez’s early journalistic work and which was later taken up in his memoir *Vivir para contarla* (202). Rudyard J. Alcocer and Haley Osborn provide an overview of the author’s interest in cinema as well as a discussion about why some of the film adaptations of his novel have not been as successful as might have been expected. Zhanna Gurvich brings the volume to a satisfying close and provides readers with wonderful images, as well as a rare and fascinating insight into her experience and the decisions she made as an Associate Set Designer for the Broadway production of *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*. These final two chapters illustrate well how an author’s works can take on a life of their own when they are adopted and adapted by other media. The result introduces the work to new audiences, reconfirming and adding to the cultural capital of the original.

In the same way that the death of García Márquez inspired Bell-Villada to pay “homage to his total oeuvre” (xi), Pol Popovic Karic’s *En Pos de Juan Rulfo* takes advantage of the centenary of Rulfo’s birth to add to a growing body of work written and published around the 60th anniversary of the publication of *Pedro Páramo* in 2015 and the centenary of Rulfo’s birth in 2017. See, for example, Pedro Ángel Palou and Francisco Ramírez Santacruz’s *El Llano en llamas, Pedro Páramo y otras obras* (Iberoamericana, 2017). Such commemorations, of course, remind us of
the canonical status of these authors and introduce them to new generations who are invited to affirm their ongoing significance.

*En pos de Juan Rulfo* is a single authored collection of essays which goes against recent trends in Rulfo criticism. Perhaps feeling that the study of Rulfo’s literary work has been prioritized for too long, or that the study of it has been exhausted, increasingly, studies about Rulfo invite us to look beyond his fictional output (slender as it is compared to that of García Márquez) and consider his photography and work in film. Nuala Finnegan and Dylan Brennan’s edited collection of essays, *Rethinking Juan Rulfo’s Creative World: Prose, Photography, Film* (Legenda, 2016), is among the most recent contributions to this trend. Nevertheless, Popovic Karic shows us that there is still scope for the “traditional” literary focus. Those chapters which look across Rulfo’s fiction, such as “La ironía en la obra de Juan Rulfo” and “Los Hijos en la obra de Juan Rulfo,” are particularly impressive.

The Introduction, like that of Bell-Villada, adopts a personal approach written in the form of a letter to Rulfo looking back after years of studying his work. The essays in the collection show good attention to detail and present clear arguments with a strong structure. I like the list of “Fuentes consultadas” at the end of each chapter, but this feature is also indicative of how this is more a collection of (extended) essays rather than a book with an overarching thesis. Indeed, the Introduction describes the book as “una antología de 12 ensayos” (13). This lack of a unifying thread is perhaps the most disappointing aspect of the collection. Even allowing for the fact that this is a collection of essays, there does not seem to be a logical order to the chapters and no explanation is offered for the chosen order. There is also no cross-referencing among the essays which would have encouraged readers to explore the collection. In the end, these isolated essays give snapshots rather than the benefit of a sustained engagement that the author’s expertise could certainly provide. That said, this loose structure also means that the individual texts would be accessible for students without requiring them to read the whole thing and most readers will probably choose to dip in and out according to their own interests rather than read the collection from cover to cover.

Perhaps one sign of a canonical text is that it can support multiple readings. The varied approaches on show in this volume would seem to support this assertion. The first essay draws its theoretical framework from Plato, Booth, Hutcheon and Kierkegaard to study the different types of irony in “La Cuesta de las Comadres” and “En la madrugada,” *Pedro Páramo*, and *El gallo de oro*. The use of Kierkegaard’s conception of irony to understand the escapes into dreams, madness and alcohol of Susana San Juan and Bernarda Cutiño is particularly striking. Another chapter provides a Lacanian reading of the significance of the sons, Pedro and Euremio, in *Pedro Páramo* and “La herencia de Matilde Arcángel.” A third chapter, “El cartesianismo en ‘El día del derrumbe’” de Juan Rulfo,” compares Descartes’ *Discurso del método* and “El día del derrumbe.”

As well as the aforementioned chapters which look across *Pedro Páramo* and *El llano en llamas*, there are also chapters on the novel and on individual short stories. The highlights for me were two of the chapters on *Pedro Páramo*. In “Las mentiras en *Pedro Páramo*” close attention to detail enables the author to highlight the contradictions in the text including, for example, the
way in which the reader is told that the road to Comala will be uphill only to find, pages later, that the characters are descending into the town and the fact that Juan is inconsistent in identifying the causes of his death. The chapter “El momento inicial de Pedro Páramo” proposes that there are three pivotal moments in the novel beginning with the “momento inicial” when Pedro Páramo and Susana San Juan are playing together as children. It is to that first moment of youth and optimism with Susana to which, Popovic Karic argues, Pedro Páramo constantly strives to return. These chapters reminds us of the rewards of re-reading and of paying attention to even the smallest details.

Also published by the Tecnológico de Monterrey, Jorge Luis Borges. Perspectivas críticas. Ensayos inéditos aims to shed new light on one of the most studied Latin American authors of the twentieth-century. The Introduction to this volume, which comprises ten chapters by different authors, is simple and provides an overview of the chapters and noting “la diversidad de acercamientos literarios, sintácticos, filosóficos, semiológicos y sociales” (9). This description, however, barely seems to do justice to the range of approaches found here. Some chapters adopt more traditional approaches to literary criticism but even these have an ambition which is striking in the way that they seek to make connections across different texts. Sánchez Benítez explores time in Borges’ oeuvre; Graciela Tissera seeks to identify a unifying thread across all three of Borges’ collections of poetry; Dolores Rangel does likewise for his essays; and Luis Quintana Tejera notes the importance of the ‘other’ before providing a more sustained analysis of “El otro.” Alongside these chapters are others which adopt innovative approaches; the other chapters have the potential to inspire similar work in relation to other canonical authors. It should be noted that the collection is not unique as similarly innovative approaches that have been seen recently in the journal Variaciones Borges, published by the University of Pittsburgh.

Olea Franco’s excellent chapter combines intellectual biography exploring Borges’ knowledge of Mexican literature with a study of Borges’ reception in Mexico. Similarly Antonio Cajero Vázquez analyzes the dissemination of Borges’ work in Mexican publications in the 1920s and highlights differences in the versions of Borges’ work which appeared there and those found elsewhere. These chapters provide examples of approaches which can reinvigorate criticism about canonical authors as well as acting as useful antidotes to nationally focused approaches which ignore the ways in which texts circulate and resonate in often unanticipated ways. By connecting Borges, Fuentes and Augusto Monterroso, for example, Olea Franco is able to point to a “revaloración de la lengua Española” (25), and Cajero Vázquez is able to suggest that while Borges did little to promote his work in Mexico, the way in which it was publicized enhances our understanding of processes of communication among authors in Spanish America and points to “la solidaridad en la difusión de la obra ajena” (249).

Borges’ passion for revisions is highlighted again in Daniel Zavala’s study of the collection of essays Discusión in which he studies those texts as well as the circumstances of their publication, revision, and compilation. For Zavala, these essays mark a critical turning point after Borges had disavowed earlier essays by leaving them out of his Obras completas. Underscoring the potential of looking beyond an author’s fictional output, Zavala notes that Borges was a prolific author of prologues and “un reto mayor para la crítica sería un estudio completo de los prólogos.
redactados por Borges: prólogos para sus obras y prólogos para obras ajenas” (69). Surely the same could be said about many other canonical authors.

The possible new lines of enquiry that the prologues (and epilogues) may open up is exemplified within this collection by Liliana Weinberg who uses the prologue to *En diálogo*, which Borges wrote with Osvaldo Ferrari, as a starting point to argue for an understanding of the author which takes into account “ese espacio de sociabilidad artística e intelectual con el que Borges y su propia obra dialogan” (90). In turn, the chapter by Luis Vicente de Aguinaga illustrates Weinberg’s argument. It takes details of Borges’ friendship with Adolfo Bioy Casares and uses them to try to pinpoint the shift in Borges’ work which Aguinaga identifies between the story “Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote” and *Crónicas de Bustos Domecq*. This change, Aguinaga argues, takes Borges away from the introspective author we see in his best known stories to being another, more humorous writer.

Felipe Ríos Baeza approaches Borges’ “Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote” via Roberto Bolaño and Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra and reminds us that texts are connected to other texts via intertextuality as well as through the relationships among authors. In so doing, Ríos Baeza, like so many other contributors to the three books under consideration, reminds us that as new authors engage with old ones, so too are we as readers constantly invited to reread and review. Furthermore, as Pol Popovic Karic notes in his concluding remarks to the Introduction, this is a never ending circle in which we as critics are equally involved as our readers will also bring their own readings to the criticism and may reconsider their interpretations in light of it. Ultimately, Popovic Karic concludes, “Parece que el juego literario nos ha encerrado de nuevo en una bolita mágica cuyas capas concéntricas y multifacéticas nos permiten convivir con distintos tiempos, mentes y vidas humanas rompiendo el molde de *deshumanización* borgeana” (11). We may, and I would say should, have (many) reservations about the perpetuation of a restricted canon of twentieth-century male authors whose work fits into established versions of Latin American literary history dominated still by the *Boom*, its precursors and aftermath. Such a canon not only wrongly excludes many authors but also impoverishes us as readers. Nevertheless, it is hard to deny the seductiveness of being part of this “bolita mágica,” part of a community of readers and authors in dialogue with one another. This attraction is particularly strong when, as the volumes discussed here showcase, there are so many new and exciting ways of engaging with these familiar texts.

Sarah E.L.Bowskill, Queen’s University Belfast