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“Boom! Roa Bastos and the Multitude”

This is the third of a trio of essays, at present in varying states of completion, in which I explore the relationship between Latin American literature and posthegemony. Each of the three is dedicated to a distinct aspect of posthegemony, though collectively they are united by an interest in machines and the machinic. Hence with their titles I appropriate the formulation of East German playwright Heiner Müller, whose Hamletmachine is a well-known recasting and reinvention of Shakespeare. The other two essays are “Arguedasmachine” (on affect) and “Borgesmachine” (on habit). Together, these essays are also intended to constitute a re-reading of the Latin American canon, and so to suggest that posthegemony is far from being a marginal aspect of literary production, but rather a central and ineludible feature of the so-called mainstream. For there is, of course, no hegemony and never has been.

Boom! Already the name itself of Latin America’s most famous and influential literary movement indicates unpredictability, disruption, and not a little violence. But this is not how it is read: especially under the label “magical realism” (in almost all cases, a label poorly applied, however you look at it), Latin American fiction is seen in terms of charming exoticism, butterflies, levitation, tragic devotion, modern fairytales. The pity is that it was so quickly and so easily defused, domesticated, captured. Boom! Already the name is transcultural, transculturated, transculturating: an English term to describe a phenomenon with global ramifications, from Buenos Aires to Barcelona; Paris, Mexico City, New York. And yet the movement’s key texts are still read in regionalist or localist terms, as national allegories or tales of underdevelopment. Boom! The name is onomatopoeic rather than signifying, interjection rather than sign: it does not so much refer to something elsewhere, as instantiate and reproduce a sensation here and now; its impact is intense and affective, a matter of feeling and the body rather than

interpretation or consent. And yet our reading of the movement's authors is endlessly wrapped up in issues of representation and representativity. Boom! There is nothing natural or organic here, rather an explosion that shatters boundaries and sows disorder with immediate effect, before we even have time to catch our breath. It is a mad machine, or volatile conjunction of machinery, that works always by breaking down, in fits and starts, setting off a chain reaction that multiplies and resonates with an entire multitude. What a mistake to have ever said *the Boom*, as though it were once and once only. Boom! As Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari put it in another context, "Everywhere *it is machines* [. . .] machines driving other machines, machines being driven by other machines, with all the necessary couplings and connections" (*Anti-Oedipus* 1). Everywhere they fire and discharge, detonate and recombine something new from the pieces. Boom! Boom! BOOM!

García Márquez

Take the famous opening chapter of the most famous Boom novel of them all. Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is littered with contraptions and devices of every shape and size. They are brought to the small town of Macondo by itinerant gypsies: telescopes and magnifying glasses, magnets and flying carpets...

and the multiple-use machine that could be used at the same time to sew on buttons and reduce fevers, and the apparatus to make a person forget his bad memories, and a poultice to lose time, and a thousand more inventions so ingenious and unusual that [the town's founder and patriarch] José Arcadio Buendía must have wanted a memory machine so that he could remember them all. In an instant they transformed the village. (16)

Some of these things are, of course, more mechanical and others more "magical," but the point is that they are all treated (more or less) equally, as examples of mechanisms and apparatuses that both expand and frustrate human desire. Indeed, they have their own force and their own energy: the gypsy leader Melquíades points out that "Things have a life of their own, [. . .] It's simply a matter of waking up their souls" (1-2).

Caught up in the whirlwind of novelty, José Arcadio happily installs an alchemist's laboratory in his own home, and it is this space—that becomes laboratory, workshop, and archive—that is the hub or engine room of the book's fictive universe,

however much for long periods it is forgotten, sealed up, and ignored. For the liveliness of things continues whether or not we realize or acknowledge it. And collectively, house, town, and family are no doubt best understood as an assemblage or set of assemblages that variously channel, filter, reproduce, transform, and magnify broader social forces through the intermediation of a complex multitude of smaller parts (buildings, rooms, people, body parts, animals, household objects) whose interaction is frustratingly predictable at times and utterly novel at others. The postal service, the railway, the cinema: all are mechanisms that direct and are shaped by flows that subsequently come to unsettle the arrangement and reconstitute the town in new ways as time goes on. But none of this is a question of unsullied nature or time-honoured tradition pitted against the invasive forces of modernization. Everything is always already an amalgamation pieced together with diverse material. Even the jungle, within which Macondo is set, hides its own long history of machinic interactions, as signaled by José Arcadio's discovery of a rusting suit of armour there, or a ship nestling in a tall tree's branches.

What follows, then, as the novel progresses is less a history of any particular character or characters, whose interchangeability is signaled by their endlessly repeating names: each José Arcadio and each Aureliano becomes simply another more or less ill-fitting cog in the machinic ensemble. Nor is it really the story of the family Buendía that seems to keep the otherwise meandering and ragged plot together. The very absurdity of the family tree, criss-crossed alternately by incest and by numerous extra-marital dalliances, makes a mockery of lineage and explodes any Oedipal triangle by enveloping it within a tangled contraption of makeshift, borrowed, and reused parts. Rather, the book is best seen as an account of all this machinery as it fires up and breaks down, upending and reconstituting social orders on a regular basis until it all finally self-combusts in an apocalyptic finale. The irony is that this novel, whose title tells us it is concerned with solitude, in fact, and thanks in part to its proliferating repetitions, presents us with what can only be called a multitude. Even at the end, when the last of the Aurelianos is practically the only person left in Macondo, the very objects that surround him invoke the continued presence of other lives that live on through shared habits. He sits in a rocking chair, for instance, that is "the same one in which [his great-great-grandmother] Rebeca had sat during the early days of the house to give embroidery lessons, and in which [his great-great-aunt] Amaranta had played Chinese

checkers with Colonel Gerineldo Márquez, and in which [his aunt and lover] Amaranta Ursula had sewn the tiny clothing for the child" (546 [414]). His response is to feel oppressed under "the crushing weight of so much past" (546 [414]); this may well be a bad multitude. But the point is that his problem is hardly solitude *per se*, or at least not in any simple sense. Indeed, this is a book that is characterized by excess and overindulgence more than anything else.

One Hundred Years of Solitude is a book that clearly has ambition to be a "total novel" and in service of that (itself, excessive) ambition, it overflows. It is not just one multitude, but many: a multitude of Aurelianos and José Arcadios, of butterflies and beauties, of inventions and apparatuses, of firing squads and wars, of gypsies and of bananas and caramels, of flowers and books, of chamber pots and doubloons, of merchants and mistresses, of (mis)interpretations and mistakes, of solitudes (yes, solitudes, too) and friendships. Everything is singular but nothing is single: another will always come along in time. If anything, Macondo's problem (and that of its inhabitants) is that it is never alone, that there is no way of avoiding or preventing the various forces and energies that sweep through it. Even shutting oneself away (as so many characters repeatedly do) is simply embedding oneself in the machine, often enough to invest still further in the formidable cycles of creation, production, and destruction that drive the multitude. The task, then, is less to resist the multitudes than to determine which are bad (pestilential or merely kitsch) and which are good, enhancing life in all its myriad incarnations. If there is a theme that runs through the Boom with any consistency, that drives its own machinery, it is this: how to live with, in, and as the multitude; how to become part of machine, to inhabit and thrive in its explosive force, because for good or ill there is no life outside it. But to become part of the multitude is also to risk self-immolation and annihilation. This is the dilemma that the Boom acknowledges but never fully resolves: the ambivalence of its own explosive productivity and proliferation, which brings life but everywhere also risks death.

Fuentes

Boom! Proliferation or annihilation; the machinery of life or the mechanization of death, or both at the same time. Each Boom author meditates on this ambivalence of the multitude in their own way. At the center of Carlos Fuentes's *The Death of Artemio Cruz*,

for instance, is the tape-recorder brought into the ailing caudillo's sickroom by his loyal henchman, Padilla. The introduction of the device interrupts and seems to forestall the spinning of past stories and memories, reaching back to the Mexican Revolution and beyond, that constitute the book's main narrative. But Padilla persists, despite the protests of family and friends: Cruz's daughter shouts out "Stop that machine!" (51). And for Cruz himself, the mechanical reproduction and recapitulation of the day's events offer some kind of continuity ("Today, more than ever, you ought to want me think that everything goes along the same as always" [11]) even as it adds to and further complicates the proliferating polyphony of voices that are liberated from the old man as he slides towards death. For the novel is narrated alternately in first, second, and third persons: I, You, He, but also increasingly a nameless "They" intervenes and takes over. Fuentes's novel charts a becoming-impersonal, a multiplication and fracturing of points of view and perspectives, the many forms of death-in-life and life-in-death that lead to the bare life of the agonizing body helpless before the ministrations of family, church, and the medical profession, with the little machine by his side emitting the only voice to be trusted in the whole crowded room. All the tensions and ambivalence between apparatus and apparatchik, between mechanism and machination, between automatism and ruse, are revealed in the final hours of Cruz's life as Fuentes depicts it. As Cruz dies, a multitude emerges, but we also see that without that multitude Cruz would never have amounted to anything: it was always present, albeit pressed to the service of individual ambition and party-state. The myth of the self-made man is exploded (Boom!), but Fuentes has no great trust in what might take its place. A whole new politics is required, new criteria for judgement and ethical behavior. Surely this is what the Boom authors are seeking: a guide to the ruins, the fragments and part-objects, once the banal certainties of any organic individuality (nationhood or personhood) have been exploded and a multitude released.

Hijo de hombre

There is no more agonized or agonizing exploration of this terrain than the work of the Paraguayan author Augusto Roa Bastos. His first novel, *Son of Man* (*Hijo de hombre*), published in 1960, is also arguably the very first book of the Boom. If so, then the Boom certainly begins with a bang, as the story's central image is that of a cataclysmic

explosion that nearly destroys the small Paraguayan town of Sapukai: "The moment when the bomb exploded on that tragic night of 1st March, 1912, had been burnt into their minds for ever" (50). A train of insurgent troops had been heading to the capital, but "the telegraphist [. . .] with his little yellow Morse key, sent word to the government-held barracks [. . .] of what was afoot." In response, the commander of the loyalist forces sends an "engine loaded with bombs to meet the rebel convoy" (50). Boom! This is more or less conventional warfare in its mechanized phase at the beginning of the twentieth-century (it is also perhaps more or less conventional politics: hegemony and counter-hegemony), but it is also mutually-assured destruction. An enormous crater scars the town for years to come, and the social landscape is similarly scarred as naked power replaces any presumption of consent. Yet something always escapes: in the aftermath of the destruction, one of the train's wagons, thrown many hundreds of yards from the site of the impact, becomes home to a husband and wife determined to take it quite literally off the rails. Slowly and surreptitiously, over a period of many years, they haul it deeper into the undergrowth. A small deviation from the line gradually expands and a multitude begins to coalesce on this line of flight as the couple's child, one Cristóbal Jara, meets renegade army officer, Miguel Vera, and a new, rather more surreptitious, rebellion erupts.

Jara and Vega proceed to become the twin protagonists whose intertwined stories (almost) bring together this otherwise fragmented and disparate novel. They meet again in the book's second half, as they, like the rest of the population, are swept up in the war machine unleashed by Paraguay's conflict with Bolivia over the desolate Chaco. Whatever their previous histories and relations to the state, rebels and reactionaries alike are plucked from prisons where necessary, and transported to the front line halfway between Asunción and the Bolivian border. Here they join the siege of Boquerón, trying to wrest back an isolated outpost from the opposing side. Conditions are terrible, and the Paraguayans end up struggling against the land and the environment as much as they also have to defend themselves from Bolivian attempts to break the siege. Vega finds himself the head of a detachment of troops cut off from the rest of the Paraguayan forces in a dusty canyon. Above all, what they need is water. In a series of diary entries Vega tells the tale of devastation and increasing delirium as around him his men die of hunger and thirst.

In parallel to Vega's account, we are given the story of the small convoy that sets out to rescue him. Led by Jara, his former comrade-in-arms, from the start we know that this is effectively a suicide mission. Jara's absorption into the war machine is hardly metaphorical: driving a water tanker, he is described as "form[ing] part of the truck, a living, feeling element that radiated force and will to the metallic tendons and nerves of the battered vehicle" (294). Later, he has one injured and gangrenous arm tied with wire to the steering wheel, the other to the gearstick. Half-man, half-machine, he embraces his fate as though it were freedom itself:

For now the only thing that mattered was to go on, always at all costs [. . .]. And what other destiny could there be for a man like Cristóbal Jara except to pursue the obsession which enslaved him along a narrow forest trail or over the limitless plain filled with the savage smell of freedom. To force his way through the inexorable thicket of facts, tearing his flesh against their thorns, but at the same time transforming them by the power of his will, whose power grew precisely the more he became one with them. (231; translation modified)

This is an extraordinary passage: a paean to immanence, to freedom through self-abnegation, to the transfiguration of the real through absolute acceptance, to the constituent power of the will. Here, then, war becomes more even than the scenario for existential survival or demise; it becomes an ontological test, an expression of *conatus* in its most basic expression. Jara becomes one with the machine, pushing ever onwards through the explosions and the falling bombs around him, to bring life-giving water to the beleaguered Vega and his men. But his reward for this heroic enterprise is for his windscreen to be shot out by the very men he is coming to save, for whom (in Vega's words) his truck appears as "this monster of my delirium" (190).

I, the Supreme

Machine, monster, multitude: Roa Bastos juggles these elements without coming to any clear resolution. Indeed, in *Son of Man* the manuscript which is revealed (most likely) to be the manuscript of the novel itself (for, as in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, a hidden frame narrative comes to light at the book's conclusion) terminates with a self-contradicting ellipsis: "There must be an end, otherwise. . ." (262). But Roa Bastos's later novel, *I, the Supreme* (*Yo el supremo*), which many have suggested to be the climax of the

Boom, stresses the authoritarian desire embedded in the (necessarily impossible) impulse to "put an end" to things, in the claim to represent them in any definitive way. Hence the irony in the claim that *I, the Supreme* is the last Boom novel--and Gerald Martin goes even further, when he argues that it "is the literary work which finally closes the era which [the Argentine Domingo Sarmiento's] *Facundo* [. . .] opened [. . .] and completing a long trajectory of novels from [Mariano Azuela's] *Los de abajo* through [. . . to Mario Vargas Llosa's] *La Casa Verde*, each of which, in differing ways, subjects the idealist values of European 'civilization' to a materialist critique" ("*Yo el supremo*" 170). For in so far as Roa Bastos does indeed offer a critique of idealism, this is in large part by way of a refusal of the (no doubt idealist) presumption to be able to close an era or complete a trajectory by some kind of authorial *fiat*. Indeed, Roa Bastos renounces the very notion of an authoritative *fiat*, of a declaration that might put an end to things or settle them conclusively. Writing, he tells us, settles nothing: it only ever *unsettles*, as it sets loose a multitude that subverts any authorial pretensions.

The plot, such as it is, of *I the Supreme* is simple enough. Set during the rule of the nineteenth-century Paraguayan dictator José Gaspar Rodríguez de Francia, otherwise known as Doctor Francia, it appears that someone has been forging presidential proclamations, leaving them in public places for the world to see. The novel opens with one such problematic forgery, found "nailed to the door of the cathedral," which opens with the characteristic address that gives the novel its title: "I the Supreme Dictator of the Republic." The pesky pasquinade then goes on to imagine the sovereign's death and physical mutilation: "[I] order that on the occasion of my death my corpse be decapitated; my head placed on a pike for three days in the Plaza de la República" (3). What follows then are the efforts on the part of Francia, aided and abetted by his trusty secretary, Policarpio Patiño, to whom he is (quite literally) dictating his thoughts and instructions. Patiño is ordered to "start looking for the perfidious scribbler" (15) and the book as a whole is then (apparently) a detective story of sorts, an account of the attempt to track down the treacherous imposter who has dared to parody, by copying, the written authority of the Head of State. But of course things do not end up being quite so simple. In line with the notion that this is a novel that refuses resolution or settlement, we never find out who (if anyone) committed the crime, and indeed it becomes unclear what the crime may have been in the first place. For the investigation into this scurrilous is soon necessarily waylaid by an enquiry into what is always scandalous

about writing as such: "Pay attention," Francia tells Patiño. "We are going to scrutinize together the secret of writing" (58). What we get, as a result, are a series of digressions, in a patchwork of genres, that circle around questions of authorship and authority, history and power, violence and legality, trust and representation. The novel's last page thus contains a note reflecting on the pages that have gone before and remarking on "the fact that the story that should have been told in them has not been told" (435). Yet by this point we doubt there is ever any one story that "should" be told, let alone whether it *could* have been told in the first place. By this point the entire representational machinery has been exploded (Boom!), and the book can only plead for the "characters and facts" it contains, and their supposed "right to a fictitious and autonomous existence" by appealing (and these are the novel's concluding words) to "the no less fictitious and autonomous reader" (435).

So much, at first sight perhaps, so metafictional and even postmodern. And indeed if it is true (as Gerald Martin also argues) that the Boom is the last gasp of global modernism, then it make sense that its final novel might also be considered what we could call the "last first" novel of postmodernism. More generally, Roa Bastos has frequently been categorized among the postmoderns, even inspiring a collection of essays about his work that goes under the title of *Postmodernism's Role in Latin American Literature*. Indeed, for that collection's editor, Helene Weldt-Basson, the entirety of Roa Bastos's so-called "trilogy on the 'monotheism' of power" (which includes the later *El fiscal* as well as *Hijo de hombre* and *Yo el supremo*) is postmodern to some degree or another, with the qualification that "*Hijo de hombre* exhibits both modern and postmodern characteristics, while *Yo el supremo* is the most postmodern of the trilogy" ("Augusto Roa Bastos's Trilogy" 336).

Yet the twist--a Latin American one, if you like--is the literalness with which the language games are here played out, and their direct investment in the political. The issues of authority and dictation refer not simply to some general breakdown of representation, but also very concretely to the workings of power (and their breakdown) in Latin America, not only in the nineteenth century of Doctor Francia, but also in the twentieth century under Alfredo Stroessner (in Paraguay, from which Roa Bastos was in exile) and the military junta in Argentina (where the novel was written and first published). To put this another way: the Boom and postmodernism alike have too often been alternately celebrated or dismissed as playful or even whimsical

(butterflies! magic!), their politics reduced to allegory at best. But there is nothing particularly allegorical about *I, the Supreme*, except perhaps as it is an allegory of the failure of allegory, and any whimsy it contains is serious business indeed, in the way that an autocrat's unpredictability is an instrument of terror rather than humour. Francia is directly a man of the state (the state's man), and the dissolution of his singular voice is also the end of any claim to hegemony.

The machine at the heart of *I, the Supreme* is the pen that the novel's editor or "compiler" inherits from Francia himself. The compiler is a mysterious figure, who increasingly intrudes into what is already a complex narrative, further fracturing the authorial unity that the novel's title announces and the forgeries subvert. The author figures, or the claimants to be the "I" that purports to be supreme, multiply: Francia, who dictates; Patiño who "merely" copies; the forger, who copies, but without authorization; the compiler who puts everything together "from some twenty thousand dossiers, published and unpublished" (435); and not to mention Roa Bastos himself. In so far as these figures overlap, they do so around the scene of writing and the fantasy of producing a text that could be both convincing and coherent. And the compiler grounds his version of that fantasy in part on his possession of the dictator's very own writing instrument, "a cylindrical pen of the sort manufactured by prisoners serving life sentences in order to pay for their food" (197). But beyond being the product of forced labour (in which, presumably, anyone who uses it is therefore complicit), this pen has a number of other significant and special characteristics. For it has a "memory-lens imbedded in the pommel" that "turns it into a most unusual instrument with two different yet coordinated functions: writing while at the same time visualizing the forms of another language composed entirely of images" in a manner compared to "a cinematographic projection." Moreover, in addition to reproducing images, the compiler suspects that "at one time the pen must also have possessed a third function: reproducing the phonic space of writing, the sound-text of the visual images" (197).

In short, what we have here is something like the dream of full representation, combining writing, image, and sound. The compiler fears, however, that we will not believe it, and therefore invites "anyone wishing to dispel his doubts to come to [the compiler's] house and ask me to show it to him" (198). Though he also admits that any such visit will inevitably involve some kind of disappointment: for the machine is "unfortunately [. . .] partially broken, so that today it writes only with very thick strokes

that tear the paper, effacing words as it writes them, endlessly projecting the same mute images stripped of their sonorous space" (198). Indeed, it is precisely the fact that the mechanism is broken that leads to the inducement of the personal visit to inspect it; for if it were working, its powers of reproduction would presumably be testimony enough. But as it is, it is arguably worse than useless, a mechanism that writes only to destroy the text that it produces as it goes along; a machine that defeats its own purpose and opens up a space through which doubt and multiplicity slip through. The link between dictator and compiler becomes then more ambivalent than the latter would wish to admit, as it connects the failures of authoritarian desire to the compiler's own fractured, delusory attempts to represent them. Roa Bastos's broken-down machinery explodes them both. (Boom!)

But the novel does more than simply deconstruct the dream of unity authority. It also claims to discern a series of alternatives. In other words, rather than dwelling simply on the failure of any one individual's attempt to inhabit the "I" of "I, the supreme," the novel goes further by welcoming the very fact that by a trick of grammar that position is open to the crowd, or what it itself terms a "Multitude-Person" who arises to replace the "Single-Person" of unitary authority (267). For Francia, the fear of this multitude concerns primarily the penal colony of Tevegó, to which he has consigned the bulk of the dissidents who oppose his rule. But the point of the book is that the threat is not simply at the margins, but also inhabits the very centre of power. Ultimately, Francia realizes that he can trust no one: not Patiño, whose jottings are necessarily and immediately corrupt; but not even himself. The possibility arises that in fact it was Francia himself who wrote the note on the cathedral door, which therefore would not be so much a forgery as a self-forgery, a parody of one's self, of the self. For Francia, the issue is less lack and loss, as excess and surplus: the recognition that even he himself contains multitudes. For "one always feels himself to be someone else when he speaks," as Francia notes (400), but writing--stories, histories--hyperbolizes this self-ottering and multiplication. "It is HE who emerges from I," Francia complains, "turning me over again with the momentum of his retrocharge. HE claps a hand. [. . .] It echoes like a cannon report. Dragoons, hussars, grenadiers, come rushing in helter-skelter with pails of water and wheelbarrows full of sand" (418). An entire army is mobilized as the I gives way to "I-HE-SUPREME" (419) and on, inevitably, to a multitudinous "they."

conclusion

However much we seem to have closed the door on the Boom--announcements of its demise were almost contemporaneous with its initial emergence--Boom novels themselves consistently resist closure, subvert representativity, preferring to any illusion of hegemony or suture the much more risky and ambivalent exercise of living with (and thanks to) the multitude, becoming part of a machine that breaks down only always to start up again. We have tried to shut down the Boom too soon, seeing it too often in the terms in which it was marketed and disseminated: as (for instance in Idelber Avelar's reading in *The Untimely Present*) belated compensation for political and social underdevelopment, as hegemonic closure *par excellence*. But this is to attribute both too much and too little to the Boom, whose explosiveness should still resonate through all the failures of the nation- and continent-building projects that pinned their flags to its mast. The Boom unleashed (or revealed) a multitude, though it never knew quite what to do with it. Nor, of course, do we, which is why we are still within the problematic that an author such as Roa Bastos opens up.

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