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# COMMUNICATIONS

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## ON DICTATORSHIP AND RHETORIC IN LATIN AMERICAN WRITING: A Counter-Proposal

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Roberto González Echevarría's recent article in *LARR*, "The Dictatorship of Rhetoric/The Rhetoric of Dictatorship: Carpentier, García Márquez and Roa Bastos,"<sup>1</sup> though elegantly written and full of ideas, seems to me to have confused almost every issue it raises and to have evaded other equally important issues rather than confront them. The persistent, largely unspoken promise of his text is that it will illuminate both history and literature by separating and contrasting them, whereas in fact it surrenders completely to the latest version of the literary critic's traditional means of escape. Where previously it used to be said that history was the realm of mundane reality and literature the realm of the imagination, critics now tell us that the twentieth century has proved that all reality is fictive and that the borders between reality and what used to be called fiction are impossible to draw, all men's actions and reactions forming and being formed from a seamless web of invisibly structured discourse. This is evidently RGE's view, and the influence of French structuralism is apparent in his text.

To summarize my objections: RGE conflates the distinction between literature and criticism, and between literature and history, both in theory and in practice; he shows little grasp of the specificity or materiality of Latin American history and literature, and therefore misunderstands the relation of Latin American literary history to European

literary history; he appears to use the theories of Lukács and Goldmann (although there is no acknowledgement of any such use in the article) to trace the relations between history and literature in Latin America, and then attempts an impossible fusion of those theories with the ahistorical perspectives of the French structuralist movement; his use of terminology is confused and confusing, and he uses a word like “modern,” for example, to mean a startling number of quite distinct periods and phenomena, without any attempt at a definition;<sup>2</sup> and, finally, he shows little sign of sympathy with contemporary Latin America and its predicament. His critical practice appears to exist in a world of abstract sympathies rather than concrete commitments.

The principal difficulty in approaching the work of writers with a tendency to conflate and condense is that the need to fill in the details and establish the specific connections which they omit can cause the reply to be longer than the original. I would like the readers of LARR to understand, therefore, that this is a response to RGE’s article and not merely a theoretical statement in its own right. However, I think I can claim to have given alternatives to some of his general affirmations already in my earlier work on Asturias’ *El señor Presidente*,<sup>3</sup> and especially in my study of *Yo el Supremo*,<sup>4</sup> which similarly compares Carpentier’s *El recurso del método* and García Márquez’ *El otoño del patriarca* with the novel by Roa Bastos, but draws quite different—almost opposite—conclusions. This should allow me to put a different view in a manner both more detailed and more general than would otherwise be possible.

RGE is so entrenched in the realm of literary discourse that this piece of criticism is in many ways more “literary” and less “documentary” than, for example, a novel like *Yo el Supremo* itself. I believe firmly, however, that in an age when many novelists and others are conflating genres and points of view for a variety of different ideological and aesthetic reasons, both good and bad, it is more important than ever to draw a clear line between “literature”—or “texts,” “writing,” etc., to use the new jargon—and criticism. I suggest that RGE’s article is suffused with the literary academic’s longing to be a “writer,” restrained only by the counterintuition that a critic may have more power or, perhaps, is less exposed (to—what else?—*criticism* and all that may flow from it) than such a writer. His solution, therefore, is to take up the posture of the creative writer within criticism itself, through an interpenetration of the devices of metonymy and synonymy which, for this reader at least, made his writing almost mesmerically indecipherable. I believe that such a strategy misses an invaluable opportunity to take literature studies into the real debates about current Latin American issues and back into the debates about the interrelation of the various disciplines which higher education institutions bring to bear upon Latin American reality and the nature of our many and varied area studies programs.

Returning to my opening remarks, however, more serious even than RGE's conflation of literature and criticism is his conflation of literature and history itself. His position, as far as one can decode it, seems close to that of Lévi-Strauss in the polemic with Sartre in chapter 9 of *The Savage Mind*. In RGE the position applies not only to the concept of history as knowable, lived reality and to historiography as a mental discipline, but also to their derivations in terms of the history of Latin American literature or the historical context of particular movements, writers, and works: in short, to the matter of historical *specificity*. What we get, in consequence, is not even an abstract and positivistic "history of ideas," but a Hegelian History of the Idea, and an extension of the modish concept of "intertextuality" to the realm of history itself, converting it thereby into a realm of Borgesian one-dimensionality. RGE deprecates reflectionist or referential interpretations of literature (the "specular" delusion, as he would have it), but his article is in fact riddled with another cardinal critical sin: that of reductionism. And this reductionism turns out to be "specular" itself (though, as in a mirror, darkly), since history is conceived as the realm of the idea or concept and literature the realm of the image. Such undialectical reductionism allows him to affirm that Bernal Díaz, López de Gomara, and Sarmiento all wrote "dictator-books"; to assume that Batista and Pinochet are much the same kind of historical phenomenon; and to infer that *El recurso del método*, *El otoño del patriarca*, and *Yo el Supremo*, novels published within a year of one another, form a coherent literary-historical "tradition."

RGE's analysis takes us through five main historical stages with their corresponding conceptual categories: first, he refers us to histories of the conquest, and specifically the works of Bernal Díaz and López de Gomara; then to Sarmiento's *Facundo*, which for him sets up a certain "mythology of writing," of which he approves and which will not in his view recur until the three novels under discussion here are published in the 1970s; then follows a cursory examination of a line of novels from Mármol's *Amalia* (1852) to *El señor Presidente* (1946) and perhaps beyond, which, according to RGE, communicate a deluded "myth of authority"; then the "new novel" or "boom novel" of the 1960s, in which the delusions of such writing, though persisting for a while, come finally to an end; and lastly the "post-boom novel" of the 1970s, including *El recurso del método* and *El otoño del patriarca* (though without any explanation of the continuities or discontinuities between the earlier and later Carpentier and García Márquez), and, above all, *Yo el Supremo*, reserved for particular attention, which, in RGE's view, is no more than a prolongation of the two latter works. I can only say that I disagree with virtually every analysis that RGE makes of these works and their connections, and I confess to my own astonishment in having to say so. Let us look at each of the phases and each of the assumptions in turn.

My first point of contention is with RGE's identification of the concept of dictatorship with all forms of the phenomenon which embraces it, namely authoritarianism. He informs us that "the dictator and the dictator-book" (note the sleight-of-hand: he will have us sliding on from the "dictator-book" to the "dictator-novel" before we know it) is "the most clearly *indigenous* thematic tradition in Latin American literature" (p. 206: emphasis mine). This exemplifies the kind of loose terminology and conceptual slippage which literary critics frequently allow themselves and the disconcerting contradictions between overt and implicit ideology which can result. The explanation lies in the confusion of history and fiction that I have mentioned, and therefore in the fact that the roles of social scientist and historian are taken to imply an essential acceptance of social responsibility, whereas most Western and especially most Anglo-American literary criticism in the twentieth century has taken up implicitly irresponsible positions, not least in higher education institutions. The text, for most critics outside the Marxist debates, has been a mysterious tissue of aesthetic values and interesting ideas, and criticism has been a matter of shuffling and rearranging those values and ideas—recently we have been increasingly encouraged to "play" with them—finding something striking to say about them and perhaps even taking them "further."

Returning, then, to the theme of authoritarianism, we have RGE's unqualified statement that Bernal Díaz' belated chronicle and López de Gomara's official history are both early examples of "dictator-books." The use of the ambiguous, catch-all word "book" here (history? novel? autobiography? essay? political document?) makes this seem an interesting idea at first sight, but on closer examination it turns out to be an empty conceit, only possible because of the essentially literary—or rhetorical—manoeuvres mentioned above. A further error made by RGE is to assume that because Díaz del Castillo and López de Gomara wrote about the same events, their books are much the same kind of phenomenon; whereas Bernal Díaz actually witnessed most of the events which he narrates and participated in them, yet was at several class and power removes from Cortés, the principal protagonist of those events, considering himself, moreover, the very opposite or negation of a professional historian; and López de Gomara wrote about those same events without having witnessed them or even having visited America, and with quite a different relation to the seats of power and the traditions and perspectives of the official historian.<sup>5</sup> The two books could not be the same and are not the same; nor was Cortés a dictator in the sense that Rosas and Batista were dictators (nor, come to that, was Montezuma: he had power given to him by the gods, and Cortés merely borrowed it from the monarch and the governor; whereas real dictators normally *take* it for themselves); nor are the three novels in question

here the same kind of literary construct as those chronicles of the conquest or as Sarmiento's nineteenth-century essay on Facundo Quiroga.

This reveals, then, a corollary of RGE's tendency to conflate distinctions: the impulse to create false unities instead of accepting and recognizing differences and contradictions. And behind this there is a political position that does not acknowledge class struggle and the conflict of opposing ideologies, both outside and inside texts. This means that instead of taking up antagonistic positions to one another, people are either perspicacious or "deluded" in RGE's world, and we find him talking about the *main* line of a given fictional or critical tradition, whether in Europe and the United States or in Latin America, as if it were the *only* one. Certainly we must admit that most bourgeois writers normally write like bourgeois writers, but there have always existed at the same time those intellectuals who have chosen to identify themselves with the causes of the people and to write from their perspective or, at least, on their behalf. This immediately raises another problem—though once again not one that RGE appears to recognize—namely whether the novel itself is not an irrevocably bourgeois form and therefore bound, no matter what writers intend and regardless of what their novels "say," to reproduce both bourgeois consciousness in the text itself and bourgeois relations of production in the relationship with the reader. A recognition of contradictions such as these might allow us to conclude that writers like Asturias and Arguedas, and poets like Neruda and Cardenal, are not and never were by any logic anachronistic, but rather represented and represent different class interests to those of other writers, including the majority of the novelists of the boom and post-boom periods.

The absence of the concept of class struggle, and the accompanying evasion of any concept of "realism" or "commitment,"<sup>6</sup> is one which shapes RGE's entire article, and brings us to a crucial distinction, upon which I should like to insist. It seems to me essential to distinguish between contradictions which are contradictions of the text (that is, ideological contradictions which the author himself does not appear to have perceived and which he is therefore unable to suppress, exploit, or otherwise "manage") and contradictions *in* the text, which are, precisely, the dynamic factors which the author himself has decided to dramatize in order to make his text and his reader's consciousness move. Most texts reveal both forms of contradiction. RGE is far from perceiving this sort of distinction, however, and this is again because, despite the incursion into history and ideology which his article appears to represent, he does not take the exigencies of those disciplines seriously. For those who accept such a distinction, however, *Yo el Supremo* must be sharply differentiated from the other two novels mentioned, as I shall indicate, precisely because of Roa Bastos' keen awareness of both

forms of contradiction. Moreover, he writes about a real dictator (unlike Carpentier and García Márquez), says where he stands in relation to him, and makes an exhaustive analysis of the relation between writing and historical reality.<sup>7</sup>

We can agree with RGE that the revival of the dictator-novel in the 1970s is not “specular,” and that this indicates some degree of inquiry into the traditions of the Latin American novel in general, but cannot agree that all of them “inquire” at the same time into “the nature and ways of contemporary political power” (p. 206). Indeed, it is here that one of the fundamental problems arises, since, far from inquiring into present relations of production, distribution, and exchange in and between Latin America and the advanced capitalist world, and the impact these relations are having upon systems of power and authority and forms of social consciousness, the novels of Carpentier and García Márquez, in looking at problems of the past without connecting them with the present, and in employing—to my mind—largely outmoded and even regressive narrative forms, merely reproduce those relations, for the most part un- or semi-consciously, and therefore uncritically. This is quite different from the case of Roa Bastos, who holds the past up to the present in order to connect them both and give his own work dialectical momentum. For me, at least, any discussion of “the power, the energy that constitutes a literary text” (p. 206) requires an understanding of the relation of that “power” and that “energy” to the power and energy which also make and are made by history, out of which novels themselves (“historias”) and critical interventions are produced. The main critical problem raised by all the texts mentioned, which some articulate more or less consciously and others evade, is the problem of *the relationship between writing and politics in Latin America*, a confrontation which RGE avoids, despite his lengthy analysis of, for example, the Supremo-Scribe (Francia-Patiño) relationship in Roa Bastos’ novel.

He now moves on to compare Sarmiento’s literary posture with that of Balzac, viewing both men as characteristically nineteenth-century figures. And so they are. But RGE does not point out that one was a nineteenth-century figure in Europe and the other a nineteenth-century figure in Latin America, or that the French Revolution and its sequel which produced Balzac was a different phenomenon, however distantly related, from the Independence movements in Latin America which helped to produce Sarmiento and Rosas. It is the specificity of Sarmiento that we should first seek to establish, and the specificity of his remarkable dramatized essay, yet RGE fails to acknowledge that *Facundo* is not by any definition a “novel,” and compares it with texts that are. On Sarmiento RGE is particularly misleading, because, once again, he insists on viewing him in terms of delusions rather than contradictions, that is, more in terms of internal desires and fantasies than of external

determinants. Although there is some truth in the statement that Sarmiento is a precursor of current developments in the direction of a dialectical literature (I made the same point myself in my article on *Yo el Supremo*), it is unconvincing to suggest that Carpentier and García Márquez have played a leading role in this development, or that Roa Bastos is a direct heir to Sarmiento, since the Paraguayan writer, to use a famous and not irrelevant analogy, turns Sarmiento upon his head. Again, RGE argues persuasively that the novelty of Sarmiento was his investigation of his own relation to the caudillo (only to refute the suggestion by what he says subsequently about Sarmiento's unconscious motives), but fails to analyze what kind of work *Facundo* is, fails to distinguish between the treatment of Rosas and *Facundo* in it, fails therefore to appreciate that Quiroga and Rosas were enemies, whatever parallelisms may have existed between them, and that this ultimately colors the views of Sarmiento in favor of his fellow provincial, *Facundo* Quiroga, since he, Sarmiento, was also a self-taught enemy of the River Plate dictator. It is therefore in my view a travesty to suggest that Sarmiento wished "the self and its object united in one moment of ecstatic self-delusion" (p. 210), since Sarmiento's effort was precisely to give voice to *Facundo* as well as himself, to identify with the people by making them speak and thereby give expression to unwritten history.<sup>8</sup> This is the same effort as that of Asturias, Neruda, and the early Carpentier, the same effort as Arguedas, Roa Bastos, and Cardenal, and depends not upon historical phases as such but upon the decisions writers make to recognize class contradictions or to ignore them. Sarmiento, like Martí, was from the start as much a man of political action as a man of letters, and his most cherished belief was in the ability of people to transform themselves through education, as he had done; eventually he was to become the president of his country and have the opportunity of converting words into deeds. For RGE, however, Sarmiento is a novelist, *Facundo* is a fictional figure, and both were deluded in their belief that they and the world were real. For us, writers like Sarmiento and his heir, the Venezuelan novelist Gallegos, were essentially practically oriented, positive rather than passive, didactic rather than ironical, and the fact that they were unable to perceive the full extent of the liberal contradictions within their own thought should not divert us from a recognition of this.

Following his idealist comparison between Balzac and Sarmiento, RGE examines the "enormous power" which, thanks to the printing press (he omits to mention the market), was enjoyed by nineteenth-century novelists, and then proceeds to confuse himself and his readers as to whether such power was illusory or real. This leads him to refute Lukács' conclusion that the novel is an "unheroic genre," on the grounds that nineteenth-century novelists *believed* that both they and

their characters were heroic. This is all the more surprising since, in the succeeding paragraph, he quotes Unamuno approvingly to the effect that “*toda obra de ficción es autobiográfica*” (p. 208), failing to see that this is already the opposite of, not the same as, the Balzacian posture. Lukács’ view, in contrast, was that nineteenth-century narrative sees its protagonists conduct an increasingly hopeless search for abstract values in a degraded world. Not that these values do not exist, of course—they are embodied concretely in the proletariat; it is simply that the bourgeois writer is no longer able, by definition, to represent them.<sup>9</sup> What Lukács dispels, then, is not the illusion that authentic values might exist—as RGE assumes—but the illusion that the typical European bourgeois writer himself could be their expression. This is a very different matter. Lukács viewed the movement toward an ever-increasing mysticism and subjectivism in the novel as the retreat of bourgeois consciousness from a world no longer coherent after the classical moment of Balzac, when the formal unity of the novel was itself a metaphor for the rounded unity of the bourgeois personality and its allegedly universal sense of self. (Lukács, as is well known, had his own problems when he tried to rescue the Balzacian model for socialist realism, but that debate is not at issue here.)

A major difficulty at this point is that RGE does not acknowledge any debt to Lukács or Goldmann (he refutes the former on certain subsidiary details and does not mention the latter at all), even though his account of Latin American narrative seems to me to trace the same pattern of relationships between the development of European (and Latin American; but more of this in a moment) fiction and consciousness as they do, based in turn—though this is very much more oblique in RGE’s presentation than in that of Goldmann—upon a perception of broad changes in economic structure and relations of production. Goldmann merely applied Lukács’ basic analysis—largely a materialist inversion of his earlier *Theory of the Novel*—to a theory of parallel phases or homologies between economic structure and narrative structure, tracing the decline in the fortunes of the individualist hero of realist fiction as the classical pattern of relations of production under capitalism evolves into the present era of neocolonial mediation with the growth of the multinational organization. RGE, however, turns Goldmann’s view back on its head again and assumes that bourgeois novelists, far from retreating into evasion and mystification, suddenly came to their senses at the end of the nineteenth century and were able to make realistic assessments of their historical situation and therefore—he implies—to perceive the essential vanity of any attempt to participate in reality or have any kind of influence upon it. (Latin American writers, we are forced to conclude—RGE cannot say it, or it would contradict his neat identification of simultaneous phases in European and Latin American



literature—were slow to learn and have only fully assimilated these important lessons in the last decade.) None of these arguments gets “neutral” writers off this particular hook, however, any more than they get RGE himself off it. He, for his part, seems to have borrowed a theory—whether directly or indirectly, it is impossible to say—and, without identifying its origin, proceeds to subvert it by dehistoricizing it. Secondly, and this is one of the matters that seem to me most crucial, he proceeds as if this theory, which originated as a response to a specific pattern of historical development in Europe, can simply be applied without modification to Latin American writers and literary movements *contemporaneous* with the European ones. These two problems—a theory only half-visible and an ambiguous though essentially ahistorical perception of reality—make his article extremely difficult to grapple with.

RGE accepts the idea that the author in the nineteenth century was the metaphorical equivalent of the entrepreneur (whilst assuring us again that both were “deluded” about their own power), but fails to see just how concretely nineteenth-century novelists *were* entrepreneurs, and therefore how much twentieth-century novelists are like the mediated twentieth-century equivalents of those same entrepreneurs (“managers” of values and ideologies, perhaps?). In any case, the word itself is unsatisfactory, and a more critically relevant concept than the ambiguous “entrepreneur” would be that of “owner of capital” or “owner of the means of production.” At any rate, these parallels are handled more convincingly in Goldmann’s analysis in a movement which takes us in narrative from the localized nineteenth-century individual or dynastic firm, on to national-scale monopoly capitalism by the end of the century, and now, in the age of neocolonialism and consumer capitalism, to the highly mediated and contradictory relationships produced by the dominance of the multinationals. RGE’s own perspective on all this, however, is that by the end of the nineteenth century colonialism had “failed” and the power of the bourgeoisie had “receded” (though in fact colonialism had merely been refined and all that had receded was the liberal-humanist illusion of conflict-free and exploitation-free progress), resulting in the emergence of, among other things, a new alienated and isolated model of the author, henceforth to be called the “writer” (Flaubert, Kafka, Joyce, Proust, Virginia Woolf, etc.) and involving a “considerably more complex situation,” that of a sickly, marginal individual who “can only exert power, if at all, over himself” (p. 208). One asks oneself whether this development really is more complex. Admittedly, the mental and rhetorical manoeuvres of this onanistic, narcissistic writer-hero may be complex, but his attempts to connect with social action and intervene in social discourse are certainly not so. Balzac, deluded or not, genuinely intended to speak to others—the connection of fiction with journalism at this stage of development

should perhaps be stressed here, especially as the same connection is evident in Latin America at approximately "equivalent" stages of social development—and there is a good deal of evidence to suggest that his readers felt that he really was speaking to them, whereas if we accept that the authors of European and North American Modernism (whose artistic excellence the present writer would not seek to deny), however "writerly," were also speaking, we can see that they were speaking to themselves alone. RGE sums up the process by saying that "the great figure of the author has been replaced by the uncertain one of the writer," and concludes: "This reduction is a demystification" (p. 209). For the moment let us merely observe that many writers in fact moved in quite the opposite direction (and in Latin America the socially responsible regionalist novel of the 1920s is matched in poetry by the evolution towards commitment of avant-garde poets like Vallejo, Neruda, and Guillén). Let us also note that in Latin American history the movement from author-dictator to author-scriptor is paralleled by the development from individualist dictators like Gómez to juntas of the generals symbolized by Pinochet or Videla. This suggests that a vision of transition between a charismatic, heroic but deluded writer to a passive, neutral but realistic (and *therefore* anti-"realist") writer is, although not particularly attractive in itself, already somewhat flattering to the majority of writers and to the critics who approve of them. RGE offers not a shred of evidence to support his implicit assumption, which is that whereas nineteenth-century writers were deceived about the meaning of power and their relation to it, twentieth-century writers have somehow divined the truth and established a more or less stable perspective, one in which neither history nor literature has any identifiable meaning nor any necessary obligations. It is precisely this ideological strategy which Roa Bastos unmasks, since all his fiction stresses the difficulty of knowing the truth in the contemporary world, yet insists unflinchingly on the necessity of doing so and the inescapable obligations of writers to the people whose images they take it upon themselves to transmit. There is all the difference in the world between his multiple *texto dialéctico* and the merely accumulative *textos-collage* which so many other writers are elaborating at the present time, continuing, as *Rayuela*, *Cambio de piel* and *El otoño del patriarca* did before them, to dissolve reality ultimately in myth.

We come, then, to RGE's assertion that the "post-modern" tradition in Latin American fiction is "essentially three novels" (p. 206), *El recurso del método*, *El otoño del patriarca*, and *Yo el Supremo*, novels which progressively "deconstruct" the former and illusory "mythology of authority" in favor of a new "mythology of writing." On *El recurso del método*, he notes that the First Magistrate of the novel is "the monstrous product of the application of European (i.e., French) liberal philosophy

to Latin American sociopolitical problems" and that he "has turned liberal ideology into mere oratory" (p. 210), but even here fails to appreciate just how much of a "recourse" that philosophy might have been in its own European context, still less how "monstrous" it might be to apply the latest French literary critical philosophies uncritically to the realities of contemporary Latin American literature.<sup>10</sup> This perspective turns *El recurso del método*, he says approvingly, into "a kind of comic melodrama" (p. 211), a posture which I would myself compare unfavorably with that of a novel like *El señor Presidente* forty years earlier (it was completed by 1933), which similarly uses melodrama to show the aspirations of a parasitic neocolonial bourgeoisie for what they are, but attempts at the same time to communicate the real horror of Latin American reality through Latin American eyes rather than the amused contempt of an implied European consciousness.<sup>11</sup> One can agree with RGE that the First Magistrate is to a considerable extent a parody of his creator, though self-parody must not be assumed to resolve problems of moral perspective—on the contrary; but the general confusion is only compounded when he goes on to assert that Carpentier is also represented in the novel by the figure of the Student, even though this same Student also appears to represent Mella and Martínez Villena. Once again the conflation suggests that all selves are part of the same great universal Self (Borges, again), so that again one asks one's self whether the nineteenth-century novelist, with his own individual identity and that of his characters so neatly separated from "the world," really was any more deluded than this new generation of writers and critics who cannot perceive any discontinuity at all between themselves and the world, even though they also believe that all purposive social action is impossible. What is certainly clear is that the second position goes much further toward implicitly foreclosing the possibility of class struggle through art and negating the dialectical view of reality which such a concept carries with it.

While on the subject of Carpentier and García Márquez, one is reluctant to make negative judgments about their works when their declared extra-literary positions have been so vigorously progressive. Yet is it not possible that even García Márquez' much publicized decision not to write more fiction while Pinochet ruled Chile may have been to some extent a recognition that his own method of transforming reality through narrative fiction may well form part of a tradition which is moving in the opposite direction from his committed pro-Cuban journalism? Again, the honesty of Carpentier's writing lies just as surely in the fact that much of it is from the standpoint of people who are spectators of the real revolution, doubters slow to learn, or discredited, or with uneasy consciences. He became much more clearly aware of this fact and less prepared to justify it to himself and others in the years after

1959, yet even a work like *Consagración de la primavera* shows just how difficult it is for a writer to change his narrative mode—which is “regressive” to the extent that it involves the whole of one’s life experience—no matter what changes may be taking place in his literary consciousness.

RGE notes that García Márquez’ dictator is more primitive than Carpentier’s and therefore less erudite (p. 212), failing to observe that García Márquez’ dictator is less erudite not because he is a portrait of a cruder imagined historical phenomenon, but because García Márquez is himself a “more primitive” and “less erudite” person than Carpentier, with a taste for “more primitive” and “less erudite” topics and a corresponding style. Which is to say that RGE has fallen for exactly the same “specular” ideology (a “copy” of or “reference” to something “out there”) that he himself purports to reject. And not surprisingly, because realism is not about to go away because we wish it to or because we find reality itself unacceptable: even RGE will eventually be forced to the “recourse,” however unconvincing in this case, that the post-boom novelists ultimately convey reality more effectively than their predecessors. As a matter of fact, both Carpentier and García Márquez have helped to foster the perverse ideology of “magical realism” which, whatever its overt rationalizations, has confirmed European and North American ideological perceptions of the “Third World” and encouraged the image of an irrational, exotic, and “primitive” environment, and RGE appears to associate himself with this later when referring approvingly to “the humor, the chaos, the Asiatic disorder and sensuousness of this world of writing” (p. 215).<sup>12</sup>

It transpires, however, that Carpentier and García Márquez are prophets who prepare us for the coming of the (suprahistorical) Text and whose characteristic attitude RGE summarizes as follows: “Our texts celebrate in advance, prefigure the real absence of dictator-authors, the coming of the TEXT. But we can’t do this without posing as victims, without being beheaded by our texts, without the spectacle of our own demise, without our public sacrifice” (p. 215). At this point we are brought face to face with another paradox that RGE has not perceived: the contradiction between the gradual development of the apparently “decentered” text and the phenomenon of, so to speak, the “centered” writer who, in the boom years and after, has been able, due to the vagaries of uneven development, to behave like a film, pop, or sporting celebrity. In any case, contrary to RGE’s appraisal of them, it seems to me that novels like *El recurso del método* and *El otoño del patriarca*, both with a totally dominant central character and a totally omniscient, confident, conversational authorial voice, are not especially likely at first sight to challenge the “myth of authority,” no matter how satirical they may be *in intention*, and I would like to know just what makes critics think that these are “decentered” texts (not that this critic would be

much impressed if they were, unless they were using the posture, Kafka-like, in order to subvert it). What the two novels appear to me to reflect is not the reality of Latin American dictatorship, either past or present, nor, in a more mediated conception, contemporary Latin American social consciousness, but instead the rather disorientated consciousnesses of two authors lost out of time. If such terms as this are necessary, then Latin American novels should be neither centered nor decentered but dialectical, that is, should clarify the relation of the author to his book and of his book to the world at large, in particular to the people he expects to read him and to the illiterate people who are unable to read him. The inability of most of the boom writers after 1967 to deal seriously and effectively with contemporary issues, and particularly with the phenomenon of the new authoritarianism, is a *de facto* symptom of their alienation from developments in the continent (they are not *in* Latin America), providing us with the depressing contrast in practice now between the dialectical opposites of Cuban socialist realism and new-novel post-Joyceanism.

When RGE finally comes to *Yo el Supremo*, arguably the most important novel published in Latin America since the 1940s, and the one which perhaps suggests the most fruitful ways of crossing the form-content divide, his whole critical edifice comes crashing down about him. He says that this work takes the problems raised by the other two "to their ultimate consequences." On the contrary, it inverts them: Roa Bastos is a novelist who has managed to rise to the challenge of the historical moment and surpass himself, whereas Carpentier and García Márquez, trapped by their own celebrity, became even more "themselves" in these two works at least, and less able to match the critical excellence of their own previous achievements. To begin, as RGE does, by referring to the protagonist of this novel as the "notorious" Dr Francia is to beg more questions than a prudent critic should at the outset of an analysis. In practical terms it is particularly unfortunate in this case, since Roa Bastos' whole undertaking is precisely to question the reasons for Francia's "notoriety" and to suggest why he might not just as easily be the "celebrated" Dr Francia.<sup>13</sup> This does not mean that he approves of all that Francia did or even that he believes him to have been "right," but the positive elements in the analysis certainly demand a comprehensive revision of the case. To put the matter in more traditional literary terms, *Yo el Supremo* is something quite close to a tragedy, whereas *El recurso del método* and *El otoño del patriarca* are much closer to the world of comedy, parody, satire, or "carnival," as RGE would have it.

The result is that we find RGE sympathizing throughout his analysis with the Supremo's secretary, Patiño, and passing negative judgments on Francia. This, I repeat, is not a reading of what Roa Bastos has written, for Roa Bastos himself goes to the most extraordinary

lengths to give Francia a fair hearing. The book argues for responsible reading and writing, and above all for commitment both to historical reality itself and to some contemporary mode of realist writing. However, RGE sympathizes not only with Patiño, the secretary, but also with the Supremo's Spanish stepfather, and comments that the Supremo's callous words about him are among the most "poignant" in the book (p. 217). They are only poignant, however, if one is speaking from the standpoint of some neutral humanism or retrospectively taking the part of Spanish colonialism in the face of the Latin American Independence struggles. Rather, Francia's words in the novel adopt a revolutionary standpoint towards Spain, its legacy in Latin America, and all other imperialisms.

Writing, for RGE, like freedom of thought in general (and especially in the abstract), is always a positive and liberating practice: "Dr Francia has also realized that he cannot control language, that it has a life of its own that threatens him. So, he takes it out on poor, obese Patiño, who represents the scribes that are liable even of corrupting the oral tradition" (p. 217). But in my view the Supremo's "constant worry about writing" does not stem from "the fact that he has found and used the power implicit in language itself" (p. 217), but, on the contrary, from his perception of the gulf between theory and practice and his belief that life should be lived responsibly and language used in the same way, whereas it has for the most part been used by vested interests to distort reality and history. RGE would have been clearer on this point had his concept of intertextuality included the historical method of examining the writer's earlier texts, especially *Hijo de hombre*, which deals with the same problems in a more ideologically transparent fashion. The problem posed is that of the relation between writing and action, and the tragedy of Francia and of Latin America, as perceived by Roa Bastos, is to a large extent the product of the international division of labor, which reinforces and exacerbates the already existing European division of labor, above all that between manual and mental labor. The Supremo wishes himself to unite theory and practice on behalf of all the people, until such time (perhaps centuries, in the Paraguayan context) as they are no longer liable to be exploited by other less scrupulous intellectuals. Francia's failure can hardly be taken to mean that the alternatives have been satisfactory.

Similarly, then, while agreeing that the link in the novel between Patiño, Raimundo Loco-Solo, and the Compiler is real enough (p. 218), it is equally obvious to me that this is a form of self-criticism on the part of Roa Bastos, and one more meaningful than Carpentier's ambiguous self-parody in *El recurso del método*. RGE's sympathies, however, are persistently on the side of writing and with the passive secretary: "Patiño is the quintessential writer, thus Supremo's diatribe against written

language and his impassionate defense of oral communication" (p. 218). RGE does not acknowledge the possibility that a writer might genuinely wish to identify with the people and be able to do so.

*Yo el Supremo* is not, then, an extension of the Carpentier-García Márquez line,<sup>14</sup> but a notable departure from it, and to argue whether it is closer to the Bible or to oral literature or myth is futile. Oral myths, scriptures, novels, documentaries, histories—all these are different activities and genres which must be carefully distinguished by criticism and scholarship, not conflated. So that while RGE is right to say that in *Yo el Supremo* "layers upon layers of texts are compiled, gathered together, edited, arranged," it is not at all true to conclude that Roa Bastos is "preserving texts at the expense of coherence or the elimination of contradiction" and therefore to deduce that this work represents "the final victory of the text" (p. 218). The separation and differentiation of complex material are precisely what Roa Bastos is seeking (a final victory of a materialist exegesis and hermeneutics?), as he himself has repeatedly pointed out, and this is patently the opposite of an aestheticist "coherence" and "elimination of contradiction," especially when we consider that for Roa Bastos the elimination of contradiction is exactly what produces incoherence.<sup>15</sup>

On his way now to a conclusion, RGE states: "The erosion of authority that has prevailed in post-modern Western literature has been played out, performed in Latin American literature through the recent dictator-novel" (p. 220). The reader will understand by now, however, why the erosion of authority is not quite the same as decentering, and may wish to reflect on the possibility that these decentered texts have some kind of equivalence to the rule of the autonomous and anonymous market and the apparently neutral technocrats who rule over it. It is at this point, however, having previously depreciated the concept of specularity, that RGE decides to have it both ways: "But this does not mean that the dictator-novel does not reflect the nature of current dictatorships; it is, in fact, a truer reflection of modern dictatorships than the previous group of novels written in the twenties and thirties" (p. 220). This extraordinary statement, which makes neither temporal nor logical sense, is a trap which RGE has been preparing for himself since the beginning of his argument. The reason he can make such affirmations, which attempt to reconcile the unspoken contradiction between his Goldmannian and structuralist analyses, collapsing historical time-scales forwards and backwards as required, is that history has little meaning for him in a concrete, practical sense. By this stage, then, we are in the realm of fantasy, which is not altogether surprising since the word "Borges" is soon to be unveiled.

RGE goes on to exalt the "new" novelists of the 1960s and after at the expense of Asturias, the early Carpentier, and others who deluded

themselves when they thought to represent the people, failing to see that they spoke only for themselves: "The author's spirit—through the medium of his voice—plumbed the depths of time, conquered history, and brought forth an original truth that was the guiding power of the work. The post-modern dictator-novel shatters this delusion, by showing that it represents a dream of power and authority through which the supreme Self of post-Romantic ideology still secures his throne" (p. 221). My guess on this question is that history will absolve them, for there is a deep illogicality at the heart of this whole interpretation. James Joyce's *Ulysses*, for example, summarized by RGE as "twenty-four hours in the life of a nobody," is in fact a claim laid by the author's privileged consciousness to the entire span of Western history, and a novel like Carlos Fuentes' *Terra nostra*, only slightly less presumptuous, playfully rearranges half a millennium in the history of Spain and its American colonies. By contrast, Asturias, Arguedas, the Neruda of the *Canto general*, and the Carpentier of *El reino de este mundo*, while no doubt dreaming, as RGE asserts, of power (like all products of the West, since the way to inscribe one's name in the book of *history* is through politics or art), were also concerned with communicating concepts of solidarity with the Latin American people, their struggles and traditions, the history which had been taken away from them and replaced by myths of the superior individual and myths of European moral and technical superiority.

All is at last revealed when, near the end of his text, RGE finally intones the magic word Borges, announcing him as the originator of a method of writing which conflates all genres, reduces history and criticism to mere literature (RGE does not put it quite like this), and has "included philosophy in the elaboration of . . . fictions not as a superior code but as one more among the many kinds of texts produced by society" (p. 221). Borges is a great writer—a great conservative writer—and his influence has ranged far and wide, but once again it is essential to remember his own specificity (the Argentine literary tradition, the longing for Europe, the love of fantasy, solitude, and idealist philosophy), and to examine just who this Anglophile Argentinian has influenced and why. And, more particularly, when? For the tradition which RGE is here celebrating is Borges' line in elegant moral nihilism, whose apotheosis dates approximately from the seminal year of 1968. RGE moves on to the "new" novels of the 1960s, eliding differences as he goes, but showing that they were still in the early years of the decade "explorations of what Latin America was" (p. 221). Readers who feel that such an attempt to unite the local with the universal sounds like a credible and creditable critical strategy are no doubt expected to conclude that they too are deluded and read on; but what RGE fails to



perceive is the real reason why these writers, far from consciously changing their minds, could not go on writing this sort of novel.

It was in fact the Cuban Revolution, and the movement of history that had made it possible, which forced writers to change their perspective, though the contradictory threads of the developments involved are not easy to unravel. It has still not been sufficiently understood that the ABC writers—Asturias, Borges, Carpentier—really initiated Latin American Modernism (not *Modernismo*, which is the preceding Romantic-Symbolist movement led by Darío), so that in reality the “nueva novela” was born in the late 1920s and 1930s and merely reached a dazzling crescendo in the 1960s—like a rocket exploding—with *Cien años de soledad* and a few novels published after it and before it. In other words, although Latin American society as a whole was not in such an infrastructural or superstructural condition as to give rise to the kinds of European and North American fiction written in the 1920s and 1930s (the relation of Latin American to European poetry was quite different), the model for such a literature existed and isolated writers, especially and indeed almost exclusively those with experience of life in Europe, were able sporadically to emulate it, without these emulations being fully recognizable as a pattern until the early 1960s. It is also fair to note that on the whole these works were more socially oriented than the works of European Modernism (which we can call “European” since so many of the North American writers involved also lived in Paris or London at the time). This is not to say that Latin American narrative has been simply mimetic—there is no such thing as an exact copy in any case, least of all in dependent capitalist societies—nor to affirm that the relations of production and levels of economic development, and therefore of bourgeois consciousness, were somehow the “same” in Latin America by the 1960s as they had been in the Europe of the 1920s. The way to put it, I believe, is that it was not until the 1960s that the *typical* Latin American novelist was socially and culturally in a position to produce texts equivalent to those which had been written, and which he knew had been written, in Europe in the period between 1910 and 1930. There are certain other very broad parallels that can be added in to the analysis, moreover. For example, one key contradiction in Europe in the 1920s was that which existed between the bourgeois liberal democratic systems of the advanced capitalist world and the communist ideology made feasible as a historical threat or promise by the October Revolution. These movements seemed to many writers at first to be going in roughly the same direction but at different speeds and with different priorities, and between them they allowed for the extraordinary explosion of the avant-garde in the period after World War I. At the same time the spectre of the dictatorship of the proletariat produced a rapid tactical

extension of the franchise (especially to women) in the more advanced and stable capitalist states (U.S., G.B., France), and the rise and triumph of fascism in Italy, Germany, and Spain. Once this latter development was fully asserted, at the same time as the great recession began to bite and Soviet attitudes began to harden, choices came to seem less free and literature was forced to divide into two camps, to the artistic detriment of both. Latin America in the 1960s temporarily allowed a similar degree of choice to be perceived, however illusory it turned out to be there also. The economic boom of the 1950s and 1960s, combined with the threat and lure of the Cuban Revolution—at first hastily matched, just as in Europe in the 1920s, with a promised extension of bourgeois democracy, the Alliance for Progress, Frei and Belaúnde, etc.—created for liberal bourgeois writers, in a new cosmopolitan era of consumer capitalism, a perspective of change, progress, and apparently infinite choice which dazzled them and produced the fertile contradictions so characteristic of Latin American novels of the 1960s. Asturias, the precursor of the 1960s, had been through all this before, and Borges, precursor of the 1970s, had foreseen what was to come next. . . . Then, as the meaning of Cuban socialism took shape out of the mists of ideology and propaganda, and itself began to harden (Castro's declaration that he was a communist, the USSR connection, the guerrilla struggles on the mainland, the Cabrera Infante and Padilla affairs), conflicts began to emerge and the stream of protest letters from Latin American writers on the subject of intellectual conscience were merely the outward sign of the fact that writers were no longer "free" to imagine and to create whatever they liked, because reality was closing in on them again. And once again they were forced, as writers had been in the 1930s, to choose. Most of them moved in practice (that is, in their writing) to the right (they at any rate became rapidly "decentered"), whilst deeply deploring, naturally, the emergence of neofascist regimes all over the continent. They began to write increasingly "deconstructed" texts whose real message—the one I have tried to decode—was that they were not prepared to confront the powers and authorities they saw only too clearly around them, on behalf of the peasants and workers of the continent, since, in an age when populism could no longer even appear to provide solutions, their own interests as bourgeois intellectuals were on the other side. And this can be seen very clearly indeed if we examine the sales and distribution of their books, including translations, after 1960. Yet paradoxically it was the Cuban Revolution itself which had given Latin America "sex appeal" in the capitalist West, even if the realities of Cuban socialism and its intentions rapidly clarified the real position of Latin American bourgeois intellectuals in a way that had never happened before, and certainly not in the wake of the Mexican Revolution of 1910–17. What had come to an end was not a "myth of

authority" but a myth of multiclass writing. Some writers, as I have tried to show, spoke left and wrote right, sustaining the contradictions of their situation ever more acutely, well into the new era. That era itself, however, belongs to the real "nueva novela" (à la française), none other than the "post-boom novel," which I would prefer to call post- or late-Modernist, with the works of Sarduy, Cabrera Infante, Néstor Sánchez, aspects of Puig, some of the later Cortázar, and others. This may indeed be the moment when Latin America (we mean of course its novel-writing bourgeoisie) truly "catches up" with Europe and finally produces equivalent, if still specifically Latin American, narrative forms to those produced in Europe, with only a relatively brief time-lag. However, I am not well enough versed in the latest developments in European fiction to be sure of this, and it is in any case probably too soon to make a judgment.

RGE sees the picture differently. His comment on Somoza leaving his snakeskin behind suggests that real history is no longer even a myth or a delusion, but just a game, a series of conceits, picturesque and exotic to the last. What comes across unmistakably is a tone of secure irony which reminds me of Feuerbach's comment on Hegel that "his real existence is looked after by the State and is therefore meaningless to him," with the result that "the absolute spirit is nothing more than the absolute professor." Real people are no more in this critical world than they are in the fiction of the post-Modernist movement itself. RGE is pessimistic about the future of Latin America—he is not sure whether to wring his hands or wash them—and defeatist about the power of multinationals. He appears not to be in the history he describes, but above it, a detached and disinterested observer of foibles and delusions. Figures of authority may fall, we deduce, but not the professional scribes and clerks. Critics are superior to actors (whereas for Roa Bastos writing is inferior to the least significant act), and RGE appears to feel that people are definitively circumscribed by the comments made about them (p. 218: we discover that "final authority" does exist, but that it is the final authority of scribe over dictator).

RGE is of course fully entitled to his opinion of Latin American reality and Latin American literature. What I have tried to show is that he not only has a "view," but also a "position," as we all have. I trust that neither he nor anyone else will take the present reply to his article as a "personal" attack upon him, since, as I have tried to indicate, and contrary to the assertions of the "new" criticism, he is certainly not alone. The feeling remains, however, and here I return to my original point of departure, that one is unlikely to write convincingly about the relation between writers and critics, or between scribes and dictators, without putting oneself directly into the article (instead of in the footnotes). Roberto González Echevarría makes a small move in this di-

rection in the last lines of his essay ("this may be a delusion on my part . . ."), while signalling, with a knowing, carefully scripted wink, that his gesture is no more than rhetorical. . . .

NOTES

1. LARR 15, no. 3 (1980):205–28.
2. Any writer on this topic must be clear on the different periodizations and definitions of European and Latin American history and literature, and, with regard to the latter, on the differences between "Modernismo" in Latin America and the later movements of "Modernism" in European and North American literature; between the "New Criticism," arising out of Modernism in the U.S. and U.K., and the much later "Nouvelle Critique" in France and elsewhere; and between the French "Nouveau Roman" after World War II and the so-called Latin American "Nueva Novela" normally thought to have originated in the 1960s. These are all literary or critical movements with the same names, but which mean quite different things. As a general perspective, the most lucid article I have seen on recent Latin American writing is Jean Franco, "From Modernization to Resistance: Latin American Literature 1959–1976," *Latin American Perspectives*, no. 16 (Winter 1978):77–97.
3. "El señor Presidente: una lectura contextual," in *El señor Presidente*, Edición Crítica de las Obras Completas de Miguel Angel Asturias, Vol. 3 (Paris and México: Klincksieck and FCE, 1978), pp. lxxxiii–cxxxix.
4. "Yo el Supremo: The Dictator and his Script," *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 15, no. 2 (1979):169–83. Reprinted in S. Bacarisse (ed.), *Contemporary Latin American Fiction* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1980), pp. 73–87.
5. Roa Bastos' work attempts to encompass all the various points of view on his chosen personage (which, to take up the present analogy, would mean including Cortés' own *Cartas de relación* as well as the evidence of chroniclers and historians), whilst rigorously outlining his own political standpoint as he does so.
6. RGE eventually alludes to this problem on the last page of his analysis, only to dismiss it without discussion: "the novel has not replaced the myth of the self with that of a collective unconscious, nor of a class consciousness, a proletarian ideology that would replace the fallen self of the bourgeois author" (p. 221). But this is misleading: the works of the early Carpentier and Asturias, to which RGE attributes the "myth of authority," are in fact examples of Modernism in the Anglo-American sense, and yet, many years before the boom, included both the idea of a collective unconscious (myth) and of a proletarian ideology (history). As in other cases, the problem arises because RGE has not made up his mind about the historical parallels and relations between European, North American and Latin American literature.
7. Let us be clear. Roa Bastos fully recognized the "ambiguity" of the world—his novel is almost "Althusserian" in its epistemological intentionality—but he insists that the difficulty of interpreting the nature-society dialectic of human reality in no way justifies ambiguities between the writer and the people or between the writer and the reader. These are quite separate problems.
8. On p. 207 RGE places a great deal of weight upon a passage which appears almost to deify Rosas as writer, failing to point out that the whole intention of the passage is to set up subtly *ironic* contradictions, and that only a few lines earlier Sarmiento had referred to this "portento" as "un hombre bien indigno."
9. I would not like readers to imagine that I find Goldmann's view of this trajectory the last word on the matter. I am merely providing what seems to me a logical corrective to RGE's presentation of such a view. Goldmann himself was eventually forced, like so many other theorists, to try to explain why no important proletarian literature had developed in the nonsocialist world in the face of Modernist alienation, and fell back upon explanations of "reification" and "false consciousness." The more convincing explanation, it seems to me, lies in the very ambiguous relations between the

- exploited working classes of advanced capitalist states and the superexploited workers and peasants of the Third World.
10. We should perhaps remind ourselves that French structuralism was itself a "recourse" of "rationalism," the product of an advanced European colonial power at a certain stage of its historical development, and that the movement belatedly paralleled and refined the so-called "New Criticism" of the U.S. in earlier decades, giving formalism a more rigorous, apparently scientific basis, and actually reinventing the same name.
  11. One might make the same kind of point about RGE's inclusion of Valle-Inclán's *Tirano Banderas* among "Latin American" masterpieces. *Tirano Banderas* is a novel of Latin America seen through Spanish Eyes ("novela de tierra caliente"), a fact which it is surely essential to bring out in any analysis.
  12. Asturias was another writer tarred with the brush of "magical realism," and eventually ended up accepting and making the best of it, due to his attempt to deny that he was a "surrealist" in favor of some more American label. His works themselves, however, provide a critique of European ethnocentrism which is both subtle and radical.
  13. There have been innumerable statements on this question, but see especially "Entretiens avec A. Roa Bastos," *Les Langues Modernes* 71 (1977):57–62, which leaves no room for doubt as to the Paraguayan novelist's sincere admiration for Francia, however qualified it may be in the last analysis.
  14. RGE makes a critique of Cabrera Infante's recent *Vista del amanecer en el trópico*, in order to differentiate it from *El recurso* and *El otoño*. In view of the constraints of time and space, I cannot take this up here, but merely record that it seems to me that his approach takes minor differences between Cabrera Infante's authorial position and those of the two novelists in question, and turns them into major ones; whereas a far more radical antagonism exists, I believe, between all three novels mentioned and *Yo el Supremo*.
  15. It was precisely Sarmiento's genius that in his text, even though—or perhaps because—it was written in the (politically and literarily) anarchic 1840s, almost all the contradictions are semiconscious, perfectly legible.