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Latin American Literature in Translation

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One Hundred Years of Solitude II:
García Márquez on
Disaster and Excess

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One Hundred Years of Solitude II:
García Márquez on
Disaster and Excess

with Jon Beasley-Murray

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Magic realism has been criticized for
its descent into cheap exoticism
and even kitsch.

“A quota system is to be introduced on fiction set in South America. The intention is to curb the spread of package-tour baroque and heavy irony. Ah, the propinquity of cheap life and expensive principles, of religion and banditry, of surprising honour and random cruelty.” (Julian Barnes)

There is little here in the way of
consolation or hope.

“Dirty realism [. . .] convey[s] the contemporary scene through the hallmarks of that scene, namely the ‘monadic’ reality of containment, isolation and distantiatio[n].” (Tamas Dobozy)

Macondo is in fact far from wiped out
from its readers' memories.

There have been innumerable attempts to copy and adapt the magic realist style, with more and less success.

If anything tends to be forgotten about García Márquez's novel, it is its devastating climax and the symbolic self-destruction of everything that has come before.

This is the dark side of magical realism,
its grotesque horror, that all too quickly
fades from the reader's mind, or perhaps
is simply not taken seriously enough
in the first place.

“The novel is [. . .] the axis of Latin America’s twentieth-century literature, the continent’s only undisputable world-historical and world-canonical novel.” (Gerald Martin)

But in the end the book is on the side of life,
of a proliferating but inhuman multitude
that even the savage dénouement
cannot overturn.



RUINS AS DESTINY

Macondo may finally be wiped out thanks
to the cataclysmic whirlwind that
ends the novel.

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to the cataclysmic whirlwind that
ends the novel.

But signs of its decline are by then
already long apparent.

Despite periodic attempts at renovation and restoration, the town, the Buendía house, and the Buendía family have all been slowly falling apart and decaying into ruin for years.

“Macondo was in ruins. [. . .] The wooden houses, the cool terraces for breezy card-playing afternoons, seemed to have been blown away in an anticipation of the prophetic wind that years later would wipe Macondo off the face of the earth.” (330-331)

“They were penned in, swirling around in a gigantic whirlwind that little by little was being reduced to its epicenter as the edges were systematically being cut off all around like an onion being peeled by the insatiable and methodical shears of the machine guns.” (306)

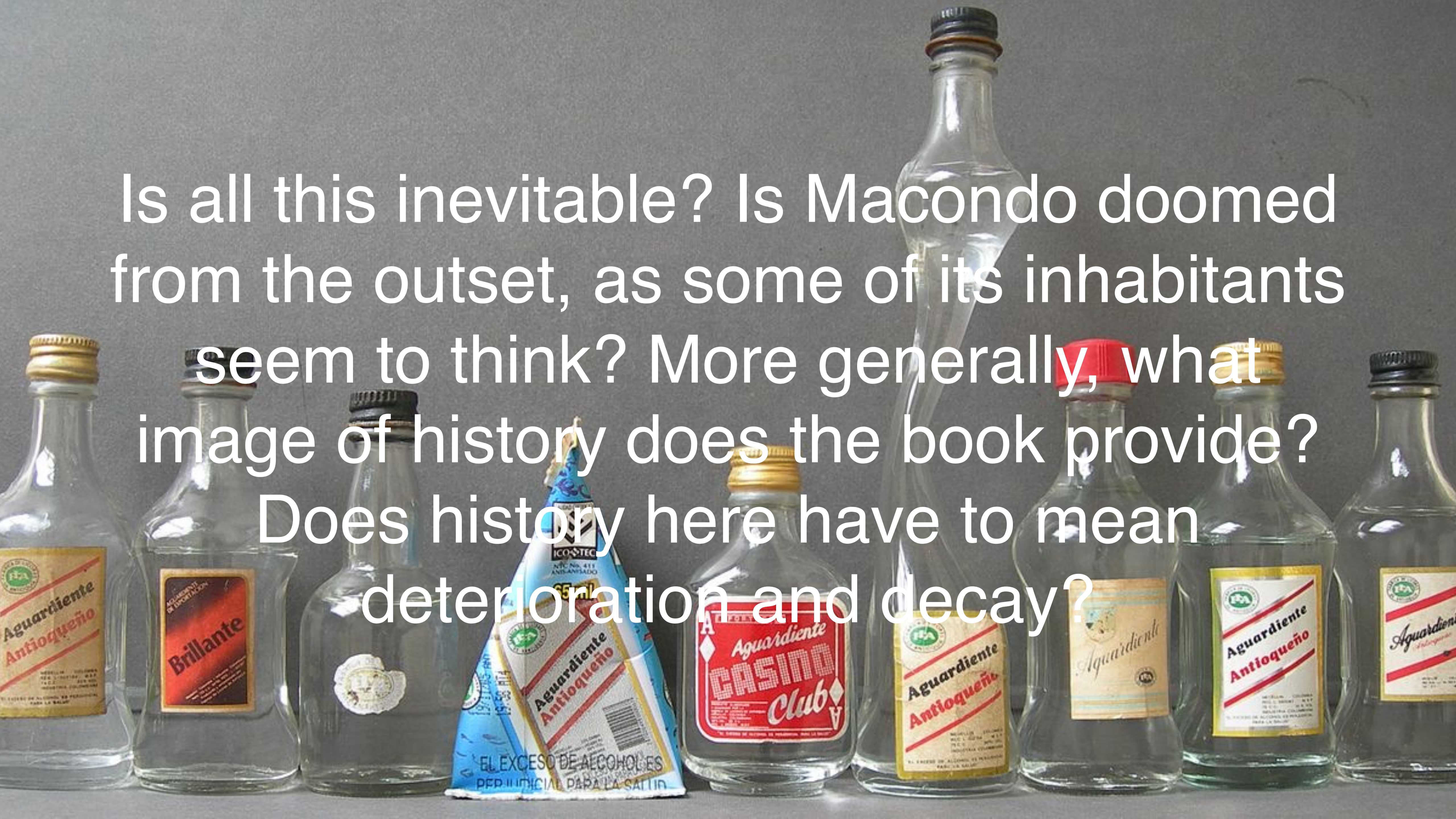
“The innocent yellow train was to bring so many pleasant and unpleasant moments, so many changes, calamities, and feelings of nostalgia to Macondo.” (222)

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It seems to herald modernization, but the boom that it prompts is soon replaced by death and destruction, misery and decline.

Is all this inevitable? Is Macondo doomed from the outset, as some of its inhabitants seem to think? More generally, what image of history does the book provide? Does history here have to mean deterioration and decay?

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The novel makes much of fate in all its various forms—providence, destiny, premonition, or misfortune.

“A century of cards and experience had taught her that the history of the family was a machine with unavoidable repetitions, a turning wheel that would have gone on spilling into eternity were it not for the progressive and irremediable wearing of the axle.” (396)

There is something inherent to the family dynamic that leads to both repetition and decline.

Yet there are also hints that there might have been some way to trick fate, or to rid the family of its curse.

“He was one of those great Buendías, [. . .] predisposed to begin the race again from the beginning and cleanse it of its pernicious vices and solitary calling, for he was the only one in a century who had been engendered with love.” (411-12)

“We’ll call him Aureliano and he’ll
win thirty-two wars.” (412)

Might this have been avoided if they had given the child a different name? Or if other children, earlier on, had similarly been “engendered with love”?

“Races condemned to one hundred years of solitude did not have a second opportunity on earth.” (417)



OPEN AND SHUT

There are dangers as much as
opportunities in being open to
the wider world.

There are dangers as much as opportunities in being open to the wider world.

There is often a sense that Macondo was happiest when it was isolated and cut off, when it had few visitors.

Heading elsewhere to seek fortune
or fame seldom ends well.

No wonder so many characters look back fondly to how things once were, when “a trip to the capital was little less than impossible” (3) and nobody had yet died in the small settlement, closed in upon itself.

By contrast, for the Buendía house (and others) within Macondo, for much of the time it tends to be a sign of health when it is open rather than closed.

By contrast, for the Buendía house (and others) within Macondo, for much of the time it tends to be a sign of health when it is open rather than closed.

Closure is a form of death in life,
or “bare life” at best.

Rebecca “closed the doors of her house and buried herself alive, covered with a thick crust of disdain that no earthly temptation was ever able to break” (133).

Rebeca “closed the doors of her house and buried herself alive, covered with a thick crust of disdain that no earthly temptation was ever able to break” (133).

Many years later, her body is found “on her solitary bed, curled up like a shrimp, with her head bald from ringworm and her finger in her mouth” (344).

“Not only did she refuse to open doors when the arid wind passed through, but she had the windows nailed shut with boards in the shape of a cross, obeying the paternal order of being buried alive.” (346)

“Amaranta Úrsula [. . .] being a happy, modern woman without prejudices, with her feet on the ground, opened doors and windows in order to drive away the ruin [. . .] and tried in vain to reawaken the forgotten spirit of hospitality.” (345-346)

As the wheel that is the family history turns,
there is a constant tension between
centripetal and centrifugal forces.

“He would appear with them at siesta time and have them skip rope in the garden, sing on the porch, and do acrobatics on the furniture in the living room [. . .]. Until well into the night they could be heard chattering and singing and tap-dancing, so that the house resembled a boarding school where there was no discipline.” (369-70)

“They looked upon her as a big, broken-down doll that they carried back and forth from one corner to another wrapped in colored cloth and with her face painted with soot and annatto.” (327)

“They would [. . .] spend the morning shaving him, giving him massages with hot towels, cutting and polishing the nails on his hands and feet, and perfuming him with toilet water. [. . .] Then they would dry him, powder his body, and dress him.” (370)

It is as though order were finally being
re-established, through play.

“José Arcadio converted the house into a decadent paradise. He replaced the curtains and the canopy of the bed with new velvet [. . .]. The cupboard in the dining room was filled with fruit preserves, hams, and pickles, and the unused pantry was opened again for the storage of wines and liqueurs.” (371)

“He armed himself with an ecclesiastical cat-o’-nine-tails that he kept in the bottom of his trunk along with a hair-shirt and other instruments of mortification and penance, and drove the children out of the house, howling like a madman.” (372)

What was once tragedy repeats as farce!

What was once tragedy repeats as farce!

Openness can longer save the house,
nor can closure protect it.



MULTIPLE AND SINGULAR

The novel's final claim that it is a somehow unrepeatable event is both an impossible paradox and a self-fulfilling prophecy.

It is precisely its uniqueness that
has ensured that it has never
lacked for imitators.

One Hundred Years of Solitude is also
largely a book about repetition.

One Hundred Years of Solitude is also largely a book about repetition.

It goes against the novel's own logic that it should end with such an absolute prohibition of duplication and reiteration.

However much you try to do things differently and avoid the mistakes of the past, that past continues to haunt you.

It is perhaps because ultimately Macondo is so full of the ghosts of the motley cast of characters that have wandered through the book's pages, that García Márquez can only put an end to it all by shouting "enough!" and bringing on a cataclysmic hurricane that tears the whole place down.

This novel, whose title tells us it is concerned with solitude, in fact presents us with what can only be called a multitude.

“He sank into the rocking chair, the same one in which Rebeca had sat during the early days of the house to give embroidery lessons, and in which Amaranta had played Chinese checkers with Colonel Gerineldo Márquez, and in which Amaranta Úrsula had sewn the tiny clothing for the child.” (414)

This is a book that is characterized
by excess and overindulgence more
than anything else.

“By means of an unreading, the text has reduced us, like Aureliano, to a ground zero, where death and birth are joined as correlative moments of an incommunicable plenitude.” (Roberto González Echevarría)

“The Aleph was probably two or three centimeters in diameter, but universal space was contained inside it, with no diminution in size. Each thing [. . .] was infinite things, because I could clearly see it from every point in the cosmos. I saw the populous sea, saw dawn and dusk, saw the multitudes of the Americas.”
(Jorge Luis Borges)

One Hundred Years of Solitude threatens
to make us mute and has to be destroyed
for anyone to write more, to crawl out
from under its shadow.

This is, after all, also a book that has ambition to be a “total novel,” and in service of that (itself, excessive) ambition, it overflows.

This is, after all, also a book that 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.


Everything is singular but nothing is single.

Everything is singular but nothing is single.

Another will always come along in time.

Even closing doors and windows,
shutting oneself away, is simply to embed
oneself in the machine, often 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, which lead to death and which enhance life in all its myriad incarnations.



MUSIC

Fósforo,
“Cochabamba”



PRODUCTION

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