The Caribbean Conquers the World? 
An Analysis of the Reception of García Márquez in Translation

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The number of translated books published in the English-speaking world is notoriously low.¹ In such a climate, García Márquez is a notable exception, 'a phenomenon' in the words of Dan Franklin, his editor at Jonathan Cape. He received world-wide acclaim when he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1982 and has achieved enormous commercial success. Between 1967 and 1983 his Cien años de soledad sold over twelve million copies in thirty languages,² and even now its English translation and the translation of his other best-known novel, El amor en los tiempos del cólera, each continue to sell around twenty thousand copies a year in the UK.³ It would therefore seem that the Colombian author is the prime example of Latin-American success in the Anglo-Saxon world. However, the present paper will explore the critical reception he has received and suggest that his Latin-American identity may have been diluted in translation. It will summarize the evolution of his critical image as seen in reviews of his works in The Times Literary Supplement (TLS) and will look more deeply at a range of reviews of two of his recent translated works,

³ Approximate figure supplied by Stephen Butler, Bookwatch. For comparison, sales of his recent short story collection Strange Pilgrims were estimated at around ten thousand hardback in the first year, and around fifty thousand in the first year of paperback publication.
Strange Pilgrims (1993) and Of Love and Other Demons (1995). The reviews will be supplemented by comments from interviews with the publishers, literary agent and translator of García Márquez.

The first major reference to one of García Márquez’s works in the TLS appears to be on 30 September 1965 (pages 867–68), in an article on the rise of the Spanish-American novel. García Márquez’s El coronel no tiene quien le escriba is bracketed with a work by the now obscure Manuel Zapata-Olivella as ‘two short novels from Colombia’. When, in 1967, García Márquez hit the best-sellers lists in Latin America with Cien años de soledad (published in Buenos Aires by Sudamericana), the Spanish original and the author received a half-page review (TLS, 9 November 1967). The main highlighted features are the fantasy, exoticism and comedy of the book. The article also attempts to situate García Márquez within the known literary world of the British reader, a repeated feature of subsequent reviews—just as the colonel of the earlier work was ‘quixotic’, so García Márquez is now compared to Faulkner and Thomas Mann. The tone of the piece is one of acclamation: Cien años de soledad is ‘a comic masterpiece and certainly one of Latin America’s finest novels to date’ and there begins some retrospective evaluation of the earlier work, García Márquez now being described as ‘the distinguished author’ of, amongst others, ‘a short masterpiece, El coronel no tiene quien le escriba’.

García Márquez’s reputation and financial security were sealed. This fame is reflected in the fact that his earlier works quickly appear in translation in the wake of the outstanding success of Cien años de soledad: the earlier El coronel no tiene quien le escriba (which had, in fact, been published in translation in the US in 1968) was reissued in 1971 in the collection No One Writes to the Colonel (reviewed in the TLS on 13 August 1971) along with the eight stories from the volume Los funerales de la Mamá grande (originally published in Spanish in 1962). In addition, García Márquez’s first work, La hojarasca (1955), was published in English in 1972. This succession of publications offered English-language readers a false idea of the simultaneity and fecundity of García Márquez’s writing at that time.

Two excellent examples of how examination of reviews and contact with publishers can provide insights into the context of the translation process are Meg H. Brown’s The Reception of Spanish American Fiction in West Germany 1981–91 (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1994) and Lawrence Venuti’s The Translator’s Invisibility: A History of Translation (London/New York: Routledge, 1995).

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Up until the publication of El amor en los tiempos del cólera in 1985, García Márquez is consistently categorized in the reviews and in the coverage of his award of the Nobel Prize for literature as a magic realist and a writer of fabulous tales. Each new book is compared to Cien años de soledad and his Caribbean is depicted as an exotic and exciting new world. Yet underlying this is the continued tendency to compare his writing to already assimilated classics of the past: for instance, Jean Franco’s review in the TLS of the Spanish El otoño del patriarca sets the author’s style alongside The Arabian Nights and Alice in Wonderland.

In view of García Márquez’s success, it may seem surprising that, after Chronicle of a Death Foretold (1982) and the Nobel Prize of the same year, the next detailed mention of the author in the TLS is not until 1 July 1988 with a review by S. M. J. Minta of the translation of his next novel, Love in the Time of Cholera (1986). Both this work and the subsequent El general en su laberinto (1989), the Spanish original of which was reviewed by Butt and the English translation by Williamson, exhibit a preoccupation with death and are characterized by a nostalgic and ironic style. There is at last a move away from the reviewers’ constant harking back to Cien años de soledad, and the new subject matter achieved a corresponding benefit in an expanded market of readers for García Márquez. Huw Barnes, of Penguin UK, sees these books as having enabled García Márquez to move toward a more mainstream readership with a changed profile for his writing, no longer the very esoteric image of the magic realist.

Although the readership may have widened, a closer study of the two latest translated works, Strange Pilgrims (1993) and Of Love and Other Demons (1995) still shows that the stereotypical image of García Márquez persists, perhaps especially in the US. There the reviews are adulatory in tone. Paul Gray in Time sees Strange Pilgrims as revealing ‘the enchanting density of García Márquez at his best’, and John Bayley, in The New York Review of Books considers most of the stories to be ‘undoubted masterpieces’. In fact, the book’s status as a translated work is almost overlooked: Time, Booklist and The Atlantic Monthly do not even

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7 Jean Franco, ‘Rumour at the Top’, Times Literary Supplement (10 October 1975), 1172.
mention that the book is a translation! Library Journal does at least give a credit to Edith Grossman. The New York Review of Books also gives a passing accolade: ‘The quality of the tales is greatly enhanced by Edith Grossman’s admirable translation’. This last review, by John Bayley, is more detailed and makes an attempt to analyse García Márquez’s style; it is in this analysis of style that, ironically, García Márquez’s prose is shown to have been most clearly subsumed into the world literary canon via English. First of all, the detail and comedy of the tales is compared to Kafka. Then, as an illustration of ‘a characteristic Márquez sentence’, Bayley quotes the beginning of Miss Forbes’s Summer of Happiness:

When we came back to the house in the afternoon, we found an enormous sea serpent nailed by the neck to the door frame.

Perhaps the reviewer is thinking more of the content and the way that something ‘magical’ is introduced so early in the story, but this ‘characteristic’ sentence is not, in fact, a Márquez sentence at all. The original sentence is twice as long:

Por la tarde, de regreso a casa, encontramos una enorme serpiente de mar clavada por el cuello en el marco de la puerta, y era negra y fosforescente y parecía un maleficio de gitanos, con los ojos todavía vivos y los dientes de serrucho en las mandíbulas desperrancadas.

It is one of the few cases where the translator has decided to divide a sentence of the original because of its complexity and length. It also exhibits other translation shifts, the time focus por la tarde being right-shifted, with greater foregrounding of the first-person plural pronoun of the narrators. Despite these changes, the translated text has passed for the original; in fact, for the reviewer, the style of the translation is the style of Márquez.

There also seems to be an attempt by the same reviewer to incorporate García Márquez into the accepted literary culture of the European and US world: a detail from I Only Came to Use the Phone is compared to Milan Kundera’s The Unbearable Lightness of Being ‘which suggests not only that magic realism has spread throughout Europe, but that something very like it was, or has become, a part of the literary spirit of our age, in Europe and

11 Booklist published an advance review by John Mort in their issue of 1 September 1993, 4; The Atlantic Monthly’s review, ‘Strange Pilgrims’ (November 1993, 158) names neither translator nor reviewer.
15 Gabriel García Márquez, Doce cuentos peregrinos (Madrid: Mondadori, 1992), 189.
America’. ‘Was, or has become ...’—two tenses, two verbs. A crucial uncertainty: ‘has become’, with its process verb of change and its present perfect tense would suggest that García Márquez and the Latin Americans had had a recent, profound influence on Europe and the US. ‘Was’, a stative verb and simple past tense, would suggest that ‘magic realism’ was not a new and innovative style produced by Latin America but rather it lay at the core of the ‘literary spirit’ of writing in the Old World.

Such a rejection or concealing of Latin America’s success and influence does not seem at all fanciful when the cover of the US Penguin paperback is analysed. The predictably upbeat blurb on the back cover ends with the following astounding conclusion: ‘... Strange Pilgrims is a triumph of narrative sorcery by one of our foremost magicians of the written word’. There is no doubting the choice of possessive pronoun here: ‘... one of our foremost magicians ...’. Not only has García Márquez’s style been disappeared into the English language, but his very identity have been subsumed into the ‘our’ of US or general literary heritage. The passivity of Latin America is also suggested by the theme of the stories which are summarized as ‘Latin American characters adrift in Europe’ (my emphasis). The cover for the British paperback edition, on the other hand, does make the characters more active: ‘the surreal haunting “journeys” of Latin Americans in Europe’.

The Times and Sunday Times apart, British reviews of the translation are not so adulatory. John Sturrock, in the TLS, criticizes García Márquez for ‘crowd-pleasing’.16 Janette Turner Hospital, writing in The Independent, considers them ‘slight ... laboured ... portentous ... disappointing ...’, and Richard Gott, in The Guardian, has ‘reservations’ but still praises the author for being ‘a master of story-telling’.17

The only references in the reviews to the process of translation are a passing comment by Gott, ‘[the] collection ... Grossman’), and Turner Hospital’s simultaneous attack on both the translator and the ‘leaden prose’ of García Márquez’s Strange Pilgrims in particular:

One pines for the eccentric brilliance of metaphor and the off-kilter lyricism of the novels. Although blame can sometimes be laid at the translator’s door (there are occasional ambiguous welters of pronouns), what could any translator do with ‘The moment was magical’?18

The point to be made here is that the perception of García Márquez’s style in these reviews is not the perception of his original, Colombian Spanish, but, rather, that of a style that is viewed as García Márquez’s despite its having passed through the filter of the translator and the target language. Additionally, there is a strong hint that his whole image and success may have undergone or may be undergoing a kind of appropriation, especially in the US context. Both these points correspond first to what Venuti has described as the ‘invisibility’ of the translator, the illusion being given that the text, through its transparency, is in fact an original target language text, and secondly to some extent to what the same critic identifies as the imposition of Anglo-American cultural values on the publishing world.

The trends noted in the reviews of Strange Pilgrims seem to be supported by analysis of UK reviews of Love and Other Demons, published in hardback in 1995. Some of the clichés remain: García Márquez is still described as ‘the world’s leading chronicler of the magical’ and his prose ‘trembles with exorbitant sensual vigour’. But the point of reference, for Mooney in The Times, and Cumming in The Guardian, now tends to be Love in the Time of Cholera, termed ‘his greatest masterpiece’ by Cumming.

The paucity of references to translation continues: of seven reviews which were studied, only three (The Sunday Times, Independent and TLS) mention the translator in the credits. Although there are many references to the style of the work, only twice is there a reflection on the role of the translator: Kemp, in The Sunday Times, lauds the ‘polished lucidity’ of García Márquez’s prose and sees that ‘his sentences beautifully translated by Edith Grossman remain elegantly controlled’; Winder, writing in The Independent, considers the content to be more important than the style ‘even in Edith Grossman’s vibrant translation’ and even despite the ‘sensual vigour’ of the language which he perceives as ‘one of the reasons why his work translates so effectively into English—his sentences quiver with rich, emphatic nouns’. No examples are given. And certain Americanisms are accepted even in the British press: the ‘drinking of

19 Venuti, The Translator’s Invisibility, 2.
rooster’s blood’ passes with a mere comment about the eccentricity of the custom.25 A far cry from the earlier No One Writes to the Colonel where the translator, J. S. Bernstein, had been roundly criticized (TLS, 13 August 1971) for using the Americanization ‘rooster’ rather than ‘fighting cock’ to translate ‘gallo de pelea’, or the review of The General in His Labyrinth, which had complained that Edith Grossman’s translation of Bolívar’s expletives ‘porra’ and ‘pendejo’ by ‘prick’ and ‘asshole’ had made the general ‘sound like a cop from the Bronx’.26

However, that the texture of a text changes with translation is understood and is even at times welcomed. Thomas Hoeksema, in his introduction to an interview with Gregory Rabassa (García Márquez’s translator from 1970 to 1982), quotes Dallas Galvin, Co-ordinator of the Translation Center at Columbia University, as stating that ‘many Spanish-speaking people who are bilingual prefer to read Rabassa’s English, because it is clearer than the original Spanish’.27 García Márquez himself has also said that he prefers Mr Rabassa’s English version of Cien años de soledad: ‘El lenguaje, al comprimirse en inglés, gana en fuerza’.28

Despite García Márquez’s own enthusiasm for the translations, it seems worrying that so many references are made in the reviews to the importance of his style but that this style is almost always quoted in English. There seems to be little discussion about the style of the original compared to the style of the translation, of the problems which translators have in transferring that style, and whether the choices made by translators in fact inevitably mean that what is read in the translation might be somewhat different from what has been written in the original. It would be interesting, for example, to investigate how far the texture of the translation of García Márquez has varied with each new translator, each of whom will clearly have a slightly different idiolect and perhaps a different approach to the task in hand. Furthermore, initial comparison of Doce cuentos peregrinos with a representative corpus of Spanish language authors compiled by Irizarry indicates that García Márquez’s writing is distinguished by extremely long sentences, with a propensity for clauses introduced by ‘que’ and ‘con’.29 There is room for fruitful discussion of how

28 Gabriel García Márquez and Plinio Apuleyo Mendoza, El olor de la guayaba (Bogotá: Oveja Negra, 1982), 81.
29 Estelle Irizarry’s results for word frequency, sentence length and other features are based on a computer-assisted analysis of five thousand word samples taken from twentieth-century Spanish novels. The findings are published in ‘Stylistic Analysis of a Corpus of Twentieth-century Spanish Narrative’, Computers and the Humanities, XXIV (1990), No. 4, 265–74.
a translator might deal with such specific issues, which are above the level of the single noun or adjective discussed in the average review. In some instances, as was the case above with the first sentence of Miss Forbes's Summer of Happiness, the translator might opt for additional clarity in the target text, a process towards explicitation which appears to correspond to what Baker calls ‘a universal feature of translation’. The lack of discussion of such issues in the reviews suggests that García Márquez’s prose has not only been translated into English—in the eyes of many reviewers it is English. Similarly, his identity in the English-speaking world seems to have been shifted away from his status as a Latin American and towards that of a modern classic writer, part of what Huw Barnes sees as the unification of culture under the English language, a unification which in fact risks stacking the cards against the Latin Americans and against the Latin Americanism depicted by García Márquez.
