How the West Was Won:
Translations of Spanish American Fiction
in Europe and the United States

Maarten Steenmeijer

INTRODUCTION

There are many reasons to criticize the still widely used term *boom*, coined in the sixties to cover a very complicated, multifaceted phenomenon. The main problem is that it has at least two frames of reference: it refers to the *production* and to the *reception* of Spanish American literature (in particular, the novel). But even within these frames the term is susceptible to confusion. Does, for example, the production exclusively bear on works published for the first time in the sixties, such as Vargas Llosa’s *La ciudad y los perros* (The Time of the Hero), Carlos Fuentes’s *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* (The Death of Artemio Cruz), Julio Cortázar’s *Rayuela* (Hopscotch) and Gabriel García Márquez’s *Cien años de soledad* (One Hundred Years of Solitude)? Or does it also involve works published in the preceding decades that were only “discovered” and distributed on a wide scale in the sixties (the stories of Borges and Cortázar; Carpentier’s *Los pasos perdidos* (The Lost Steps); Asturias’s *El señor presidente*)? As for the production, does the term exclusively apply to Spanish originals or also to translations? As for the reception, it is not clear whether the term should only be applied to the sudden increase in interest in contemporary Spanish American literature and its subsequent overnight celebrity, or if it covers as well intrinsic literary qualities and even has value as a period concept, as some scholars seem to assume.

Is this confusion reason enough to disqualify the term and to decide not to use it at all? I think one should disapprove of its use in the field of literary history, because it does not refer to intrinsic literary qualities and therefore by definition cannot be a period concept. Also, one should be aware of the reproachable tendency to reduce the *corpus* of this complicated phenomenon to the work of a small group of writers (Julio Cortázar, Carlos Fuentes, Gabriel García Márquez, Mario Vargas Llosa) and to a very specific period of time (1960–1970 or, as also has been
suggested, 1965–1972). Instead, the diversity of the boom should be taken more into consideration. In fact, there were many booms. Nevertheless, the evocative power of the very term makes it suitable to refer to what was indeed a boom: the “explosively” increasing interest in Spanish American literature in the Spanish-speaking world, in Europe, and in the United States of America. It was a striking phenomenon, for in a relatively short period Spanish American literature gained sufficient prestige to be considered world literature, in spite of the weak economic position of the subcontinent, in spite of the persistent prejudices about its people and its culture, and in spite of the language barriers.

It is in this rather strict sense that I will use the term in this article, in which I propose to analyze succinctly how the introduction and establishment of this virtually unknown literature in the European and American book market took place. Where and how did it start? Where and how did it continue? Which countries set the trend and which ones followed in their footsteps? On the basis of these questions, this article studies the reception of translated Spanish American literature in Europe and the United States of America in its most spectacular, if not most important phase: the period of the introduction of the nueva novela. In other words, the period of the boom. It proposes to do so on a quantitative basis, comparing systematically the years of publications of significant translations and, on the basis of the results of this comparative analysis, examining the validity of the assumptions that have been made about the phenomenon.

THE BEGINNING

In 1951 the prestigious French publishing house Gallimard initiated “La Croix du Sud,” a collection dedicated exclusively to Ibero-American literature, founded and directed by Roger Caillois. It was a courageous and important project, for it is, to my knowledge, the first systematic publishing attempt to introduce Spanish American literature to a reading public outside the Spanish-speaking world. In one sense, “La Croix du Sud” owes much to coincidence. In 1939, Roger Caillois had been invited to Buenos Aires to give a series of lectures on mythology. During his visit, he was surprised by the outbreak of the war and only returned to France following a five-year exile. In that period, he learned Spanish, became a regular contributor of the epochal review Sur, fell in love with its founder Victoria Ocampo and—what is most relevant here—became passionately acquainted with Spanish American literature. In the fourteenth issue of Lettres Françaises (October 1944)—the magazine edited by Caillois in Buenos Aires during World War II under the patronage of Sur—he published his versions of “La lotería en Babilonia” (The Lottery in Babylonia) and “La biblioteca de Babel” (The Library of Babel), the
first French translations of Borges's stories. Borges was also the first writer to appear in "La Croix du Sud": *Fictions* was published in 1952 (Bareiro Saguier 55–56; Molloy 178–81; King 69 and 101).

In another sense, though, it was anything but a coincidence that this publishing initiative was taken in France, where the seeds of interest in Spanish American literature had already been sowed around the turn of the century, as Sylvia Molloy convincingly showed in her reception study *La diffusion de la littérature hispano-américaine en France au XXe siècle*. Molloy distinguishes three phases: "La découverte" (1900–1920), "Les débuts d'un dialogue" (1920–1940) and "Le dialogue et l'échange" (1940–). In other words, long before the *boom*, France had already "discovered" Spanish American literature. The list of titles included in "La Croix du Sud" during the first decade of its existence is a marked sign of this relatively early acquaintance with Spanish American literature: besides introducing the work of Jorge Luis Borges, Alejo Carpentier, Juan Rulfo, and Ernesto Sabato, the collection included works of authors who wrote in the traditional style that dominated Spanish American prose before the new novel changed the scene: Ciro Alegría, Gabriel Casaccia, Carlos Luis Fallas, Rómulo Gallegos, Ricardo Güiraldes, Martín Luis Guzmán, Mario Monteforte Toledo, Adalberto Ortiz, Miguel Otero Silva. Without denying the pioneering character of "La Croix du Sud" (the inclusion of Borges et al.) one cannot but conclude that in the fifties it was above all the realist vein of the *novela de la tierra* that gave "La Croix du Sud" its identity.

In this respect, "La Croix du Sud" was only innovative quantitatively, not qualitatively, for various *novelas de la tierra* had already been translated and published in the preceding decades (though not as methodically as in the fifties). It should be added that France was not the only country where translations of the *novela de la tierra* were published in the decades preceding the *boom*. The same holds for Germany, Italy, the United States and—to a lesser degree—England, as a random check concerning the publication of the translations of six classic *novelas de la tierra* shows:

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<th>Title</th>
<th>France</th>
<th>Germany</th>
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<td><em>El mundo es ancho y ajeno</em> (1941) (Alegria)</td>
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<td>1962</td>
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<td><em>Los de abajo</em> (1916) (Mariano Azuela)</td>
<td>1930</td>
<td>1930</td>
<td>1945</td>
<td>1929</td>
<td>1930</td>
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<td><em>Doña Bárbara</em> (1929) (Rómulo Gallegos)</td>
<td>1943</td>
<td>1952</td>
<td>1946</td>
<td>1931</td>
<td>—</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Don Segundo Sombra</em> (1926) (Ricardo Güiraldes)</td>
<td>1932</td>
<td>1934</td>
<td>1940</td>
<td>1935</td>
<td>1935</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Huasipungo (1934)
(Jorge Icaza)

La vorâgine (1924)
(José Eustasio Rivera)

1934 1934 1941 1935 —

According to this table, France was the first to publish the novela de la tierra, followed closely by the United States. In spite of this, it seems that before the boom “for the common reader . . . [Latin American] literature was not even a mystery nor terra incognita—it was an indifferent void” (Rodríguez Monegal 1969, 3). This table confirms that in the thirties there was a first attempt to inspire interest in Latin American literature in Germany (Gewecke 542–49) and that until the sixties the production of translations of Spanish American literature was rather modest in Italy.

ITINERARIES

There is broad consensus about the pioneering role of France in establishing the itinerary of the nueva novela (see, for example, Molloy 183; Luchting 82; Bellini 7; Gewecke 556; Wiese 116–17). The favorable conditions that made possible this privileged position include familiarity with Spanish American literature acquired in the course of this century, modest yet unique in Europe; direct contacts between writers and editors (Roger Caillois’s acquaintance with the Sur group; contacts developed by the writers themselves, many of whom lived in Paris for a longer or shorter period); the availability of expert and enterprising translators (Couffon 224); and last but not least the relatively close and intensive contacts with the leading literary circles of Barcelona, where the legendary literary agent Carmen Balcells (the godmother of the boom) displayed amazing skill in publicizing the new Spanish American literature in and outside the Spanish-speaking world, and where publishing house Seix Barral initiated the epochal Premio Biblioteca Breve in 1962 and published many classics of the nueva novela in the following years, distributing them all over the Spanish-speaking world. It is hardly surprising, then, that in the sixties Barcelona earned the epithet of “capital of Spanish America.”

Given their important position in the international book market, it is only fair to suppose that the United States and England also played a mediating role. It is important to add, though, that this role has been mainly attributed to the United States (Gewecke 556; Steenmeijer 1989, 87; Wiese 117). Curiously enough, however, these and similar statements about the translation boom have not been done on the basis of a systematic comparison but rather off the cuff or, at best, on the basis of loose facts. It would be no luxury, then, to verify these statements, proceeding
in a more systematic way. It should be stressed that the subject is far too complicated to be treated exhaustively here. In fact, the elementary nature of the data presented below forces us to consider the conclusions to be no more than tentative.

The following comparative analysis concerns six countries. Besides the five countries already mentioned—United States, England, France, Germany, and Italy—I have included Holland. This country is an interesting case because of the smaller scale of its book market, its tendency to follow international trends and the fact that Spanish American literature was as good as nonexistent here before the *nueva novela* made its appearance, due to the lack of direct contacts with Spanish American literature and its very modest presence, if not absence in the academic curricula.

My analysis is restricted to ten representative authors, for the sake of clarity and pragmatism (exhaustive bibliographies are only available for some national languages). These sample cases share the following two qualities: first, they acquired an international reputation in the fifties and the sixties and, secondly, their work was translated in all six countries. They include José María Arguedas, Miguel Angel Asturias, Jorge Luis Borges, Alejo Carpentier, Julio Cortázar, José Donoso, Carlos Fuentes, Gabriel García Márquez, Juan Rulfo, and Mario Vargas Llosa.

The first comparison concerns the publication of the first translations of these authors in each of the countries mentioned above. In each of the ten resulting rankings the country that first published a translation of the author in question occupies the first place and gets six points; the country that follows receives five points, and so on. On the basis of these ten rankings the following table can be compiled:

1. France (53 points)
2. Italy (47 points)
3. Germany (44 points)
4. United States (41 points)
5. England (39 points)
6. Holland (34 points)

According to this table, France is in fact the country where the *boom* of translations emerged. But not across the board, as can be deduced from the relatively modest difference in points. There is, in fact, a conspicuous diversity: in four rankings France occupies the first place; Germany in two, just as the United States (in one case together with England); Italy leads in one case and so does Holland. To be more specific: France was the first country to translate Asturias (*Leyendas de Guatemala* [Legends of Guatemala] 1932⁴), Borges (*Ficciones* [Fictions] 1952),
Cortázar (Los premios [The Prizes] 1961), and García Márquez (El coronel no tiene quien le escriba [No One Writes to the Coronel] 1963); Arguedas (Los ríos profundos [Deep Rivers] 1965) and Rulfo (Pedro Páramo 1958) made their first appearance in Germany; Fuentes (La región más transparente [Where the Air is Clear] 1960) in the United States; Donoso (Coronación [Coronation] 1965) in England and the United States; Carpentier in Italy (Los pasos perdidos [The Lost Steps] 1953); and Vargas Llosa (La ciudad y los perros [The Time of the Hero] 1964) in Holland.

Another relevant factor that should be taken into consideration is the time span between the publication of the original and the publication of the translation. The ranking of the sum of the resulting figures show almost the same differences between the six countries (only England and the United States have changed places):

1. France (44 years)
2. Italy (45 years)
3. Germany (59 years)
4. England (85 years)
5. United States (89 years)
6. Holland (98 years)

To check these results I have analyzed the same two samples on the basis of another comparison: the magnum opus of each of the ten selected authors. The titles, followed by the year of publication of the Spanish version, include Arguedas’s Los ríos profundos (1958); Asturias’s El señor presidente (1946); Borges’s Ficciones (1944); Carpentier’s Los pasos perdidos (1953); Cortázar’s Rayuela (1963); Donoso’s El obsceno pájaro de la noche [The Obscene Bird of the Night] (1970); Fuentes’s La muerte de Artemio Cruz (1962); García Márquez’s Cien años de soledad (1967); Rulfo’s Pedro Páramo (1955); Vargas Llosa’s La casa verde [The Green House] (1965). The comparison of the years of publication results in the following ranking:

1. France (52 points)
2. Italy (48 points)
3. Germany/United States (45 points)
4. England (43 points)
5. Holland (27 points)

Comparing the time spans between the years of publication of the originals and the years of publication of the translations of the titles mentioned above results in the same ranking:
1. France (43 years)
2. Italy (59 years)
3. Germany/United States (77 years)
4. England (79 years)
5. Holland (117 years)

The minimal differences between these four rankings suggest the following conclusions:

- France is, in the main, the country where new Spanish American literature was published first.
- The United States occupies a less significant position than expected. According to these rankings, this country was, generally speaking, slower to introduce the *nueva novela* than Italy and, probably, Germany.
- There are scarcely any differences between England and the United States. The explanation is obvious: the two countries publish the same translations. The similar positions in the rankings, however, obscure the leading position of the United States in the English-speaking world, because most translations were produced in the United States. This explains the slightly lower ranking of England in most of the rankings: not all translations were published simultaneously in the United States and England.
- The state of affairs in Germany turns out to be much more favorable than could be expected based on what has been documented on the subject thus far. In no other country has the reception of Latin American literature been studied as extensively as in Germany. And in no other country has this been done in such a (self-)accusatory tone (see, for example, Menén Desleal, Reichardt, Siebenmann 1972, Lorenz, Broyles, Wiese, Brown). Even as late as 1977 a German scholar wrote disparagingly about the "Nichtexistenz lateinamerikanischer Literatur in den Ländern deutscher Sprache" (Lorenz 100). In 1976 Hans Magnus Enzensberger dubbed the Germans the "last discoverers of Latin America" (Wiese 115). Maybe these severe reactions are justified as far as reception (by the German reading public and, possibly, the critics) is concerned, despite the unnecessarily harsh responsibility attributed to the publishing houses. Wiese even pretends that Germany lagged behind Holland (Wiese 118). My samples indicate, however, that Holland was far behind the other five selected countries, including Germany, which, in fact, was one of the first countries to publish new Spanish American fiction (see also Siebenmann 1972, 88; Steenmeijer 1989, 84–90).
world. Obviously, this order doesn't necessarily imply that the countries ranked lower followed in the footsteps of the countries that lead. In theory, all countries might have "imported" the nueva novela independently. However, secondary sources indicate that this is very unlikely and that France and the United States played a leading role (Molloy 183; Luchting 82; Bellini 7; Gewecke 556; Wiese 116-17). Authors and works established in these two countries stood a better chance of being translated and published in Italy, Germany, England, and Holland than authors that had not been published yet in these two countries.

The leading role attributed to France is not contradicted by these case studies. In Italy and Germany, however, the role of the United States seems to have been far less important than one would have expected: most of the titles were published there before they were in the United States. Furthermore, the above rankings suggest it is not improbable that the United States set the trend for England and Holland.

In order to gain more insight in the process of trendsetting, one could take a closer look at the first translated work of the ten selected authors in each country comparing their years of publication with those in the other five countries. The choice for first translations—that is, of a work of an as yet unknown author—is not accidental, for in this case it is much more probable that a publishing house relies on decisions made by foreign colleagues with respect to this writer than in the case of a writer already published in the receiving country.

The results of this comparison are worthy of further analysis. As we have already seen, France was the first country to publish translations of works by Asturias, Borges, Cortázar, and García Márquez. Furthermore, although France was not the first to publish Carpentier (Italy: Los pasos perdidos, 1953), it was the first to publish a translation of El reino de este mundo (The Kingdom of This World) (1955). But in the remaining cases (50 percent) France was not a trendsetter: the works with which Arguedas, Donoso, Fuentes, Rulfo, and Vargas Llosa made their first appearance in France had already been published in Germany, United States, Germany, and Holland, respectively.

Although France does not provide an overarching model, there is reason enough to suppose that it was the most important one. See for example the following table, which gives a survey per country of the number of times that a first translation had already been published in one of more of the other five countries:

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<td>Germany</td>
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<td>USA</td>
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France stands out in two respects: more than any other country, it had already published a significant number of the first translations of the other five countries (compare the figures in the first two vertical columns). This holds for all the countries together (see the sum totals in the last horizontal column) and for each individual country, except Holland, where France comes after Germany and the United States and shares the third position with England and Italy. Furthermore, France may not have been the leading country in six cases (see the first horizontal column), but in all of them it followed quickly after the leading countries (hence the low figures in the first horizontal column).

Another important conclusion that can be drawn from this table is that, in fact, Germany's declared culpability in ignoring literature from Spanish America is unjustified, at least insofar as its production is concerned. Generally speaking, the *nueva novela* wasn't introduced here later than in Italy, the United States, and England.

The data presented here induce us to call into question certain established notions about the boom and to adjust them. Generally speaking, France was in fact the first country to embrace the *nueva novela* and could, therefore, serve as an important model for other Western countries (the United States, England, Italy, Germany, Holland and, probably, several other countries in Western Europe). It is equally true, though, that France was not an omnipresent trendsetter. Contrary to what has generally been assumed in Germany and Italy, in a considerable number of cases these two countries took an independent course. The only country that can be said to have been a true follower of trends is Holland. Surprisingly enough, in the United States the new narrative from Spanish America was, broadly speaking, introduced somewhat later than in Italy and, probably, Germany. Therefore, the mediating role of the United States in the boom in translations must have been less substantial than has generally been assumed.

An examination of publishing and translation trends is of interest for what it suggests not only about the circulation of Latin American literature but also about the reception patterns of that literature in the various countries. Clearly the French example just mentioned suggests that the experimental nature of the new literature could be integrated more smoothly there because of the experimental aesthetic already established. The more commercial nature of publishing in the United States seems to have waited for a new product to arrive, namely, spearheaded by García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (see Mudrovčić in this collection). Critics have often lamented the U.S. publishing expectations of Latin American writers to solely produce novels in the magic

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<td>England</td>
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<td>Holland</td>
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realist mode. The reception of the new Latin American novel in Europe and the United States is not a single unified story, but a series of micro-histories that reflect the reading public, cultural institutions, and the initiative of individual translators, promoters, and agents.

NOTES

1. Including translations published in Switzerland.

2. Its first winner was a young, unknown writer who was soon to become one of the central writers of the boom, Mario Vargas Llosa, who had competed with his first novel, *La ciudad y los perros*.

3. In view of the different spheres of influence of the two Germanies and in view of the theme of this article, I leave East Germany aside.

4. Strictly speaking, *Leyendas de Guatemala* is no nueva novela. But even if we exclude this book, France still was the first country to publish Asturias (the French version of *El señor presidente* appeared in 1952).

5. In the few cases that Dutch publishers set the trend, the response was anything but stimulating, as the reception of the Dutch translation of *La ciudad y los perros* shows. Holland was the first country in the world to publish a translation of Vargas Llosa’s first novel (only one year after the publication of the Spanish original). Its reception was poor (the book was scarcely reviewed, and not in very positive terms) so that it is hardly surprising that Vargas Llosa’s second novel (*La casa verde*, 1966) was not translated in the sixties. Only when the boom finally reached Holland (with the publication of the Dutch version of *Cien años de soledad* in 1972) did Vargas Llosa get a second chance. Since then, he has been one of the most translated and most appreciated Spanish American authors in Holland. The reception of García Márquez’s work followed a similar course (Steenmeijer 1989, 118–21).


WORKS CITED


