

## Eva Luna: Writing as History

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In the beginning was the Word. And in the end. The opening lines of Isabel Allende's *Eva Luna* (1989) place us squarely in a world created and structured by the written word: "My name is Eva, which means 'life,' according to a book of names my mother consulted" (1). Indeed, the entire first chapter of that novel functions to displace our center of reference from the real world to the world of the Book where the life of the imagination is privileged. The epigraph to Allende's work comes from the paradigmatic *Arabian Nights*, in which Scheherazade's story-telling keeps her from a certain and undeserved death, setting up a primary theme of salvation through fabulation. Fabulation is here redemption of the *collective*, for Scheherazade's fables save not only herself but all women, thus putting an end, by non-violent means, to the death sentence enacted upon the harem/population. The importance of this becomes more evident when we reflect upon the novel and the cultural context from which Isabel Allende writes.

The lack of connection between writing and political activism has been one of the major charges levelled at the self-reflexive literature characteristic of the Boom that immediately preceded Allende's work. Although her literature is not innovative in the formal way that high modern Boom literature was, she very clearly believes in the revolutionary possibilities of literature to create and remake life and the impossibility of an authentic literature that is not intimately connected with reality. In *Eva Luna* and in *The House of the Spirits* (1985) as well, she shows that writing has a sacred, transcendental quality, which is explored in the creation and resurrection myths and stories that appear in those novels. Eva describes her mother and the legacy she passes on:

Words are free, she used to say, and she appropriated them; they were all hers. She sowed in my mind the idea that reality is not only what we see on the surface; it has a magical dimension as well and, if we so desire, it is legitimate to enhance it and color it to make our journey through life less trying. (22)

Allende's language here reflects the commodification/impooverishment of reality in a world ruled by economic and political repression as a counterpoint to one lightened by the liberating potential of words. But if instead fiction is not integrated into reality, the opposite occurs, as with Zulema, Riad Halabí's wife: "My stories did not make her happy; they merely filled her head with romantic ideas, and led her to dream of impossible escapades and borrowed heroes, distancing her totally from reality" (155). Eva tells the Minister of Defense that her ideas come from "things that are happening and things that happened before I was born . . ." (301). What she doesn't say is that *Bolero*, her telenovela, which he is questioning, is the story of her (made) life.

Clearly, then, because fiction is so intimately entwined with life, it is *a priori* political. Rolf Carlé, the documentary cinéaste, and his mentor and boss, Señor Aravena, debate this concept numerous times in the book, even though they genuinely agree that art can change history; it is for that reason that they run the risk of arrest, torture, and even death.

At the very end of the book Rolf and Eva merge the personal and the political when they agree to tell the story of the guerrillas' escape from Santa María through an episode in her telenovela, a story in which they both had participated and which Rolf had filmed. This device, quite common in Chile and other similar political regimes, ensures the diffusion of the truth that censors will not allow on the regular news channels.

### *Writing as Literary History*

This Bildungsroman of Eva's professional development as a writer reflects—in a somewhat fragmented manner—important developments in Latin American literary history. While reading this novel I felt that her personal quest was paralleled by an aesthetic quest, manifested in the trying on and taking off of various genres, literary movements and myths characteristic of Latin America; she even goes so far as to explicitly allude to specific authors and their individual works. Although some of these are simply lightheartedly parodied,

others are reworked and reinterpreted in the light of the feminist enterprise of the past twenty-five years. *Eva Luna* transgresses fundamentally because it has an intellectually strong, sexual, nurturing, very feminine protagonist, setting up an initial rupture with the dichotomy so clearly demarcated by Octavio Paz between “the mother and the whore.”

Four primary categories suggest themselves: myth and the mythic consciousness; magical realism; Boom writers; and then a miscellaneous grouping that subsumes a host of other significant literatures and literary themes: the picaresque, the neo-romantic, novels of the dictators, the ever-present conflict between civilization and barbarism, and testimonial literature. As the novel’s contact with soap operas and radio serials is so evident, this article will not address that connection.

### *Myth and the Mythic Consciousness*

The critic Wolfgang Karrer has suggested the importance of the creation myth in chapter one of this novel (7). I would like to suggest that two other chapters, six and ten, also participate in a creation myth, and that all three of these are linked by the idea of creation through words. Chapter one gives us the physical creation of the first woman, Eva/Eve, chapter six her re-creation as an erotic being, and chapter ten a further incarnation as a politically committed writer.

In “Transformation and Transvestism in *Eva Luna*,” Karrer suggests that the “opening story of Consuelo and the Indian gardener, dying and resurrecting under Consuelo’s love making, carries overtones of a creation myth. Man and woman, Indian and Spanish races (in a neat gender inversion of the Pocahontas/Malinche myth), death and life, moon and ‘Sándolo Sol’ . . . snake and life essence, all fuse to create Eva Luna” (156). From the beginning, then, traditionally masculine frameworks of separation and hierarchy are deconstructed and converted to traditionally feminine ones of wholeness and fusion, a changeover that the critic Z. Nelly Martínez has read as a political act in Allende’s *The House of the Spirits* (1991, 66-76 *passim*). Karrer also suggests that Eva fulfills the archetypal code described by Della Grisa (1985) which:

begins both with the title and her name. It determines her miraculous creation, the heroic liberation from mother to father figures, it provides friendly helpers and magical gifts, and leads to her magical transformation from domestic prisoner to liberator of

prisoners. . . . But instead of reflecting Latin American history in this circular myth . . . Allende chooses to thoroughly feminize it. It is Eva Luna who rescues Rolf Carlé from the dragon of his past, who brings the treasure to Mimi, helps to free the prisoners and take the good news to the people. Her individuation owes more to mother, "grandmother" Elvira, and "sister" Mimi than to male help from Huberto Naranjo or even Riad Halabi. (157)

It is Halabi, however, who gives birth to the second Eva in chapter six. He rescues her and brings her to Agua Santa where she says that "for the first time in my life, I was free to come and go; until then I had always been confined behind walls or forced to wander lost in a hostile city" (151). He teaches her to read and write; he gives her the emotional and financial security and leisure to do so; just as important, he provides her with a birth certificate, the only proof of her existence in the world. Like Scheherazade with the sultan in the *Arabian Nights*, he brings her to life as an erotic being, as an embodiment of the life-force Eros. Most interestingly, however, he does not become her lover until the night before she leaves, as a result of her metamorphosis and not as its cause. Thus, it is as nurturer and guide (a "helper" in Della Grisa's terminology) that he functions. And the agency of this instruction is through none other than that book which reigns over all of *Eva Luna*, the *Arabian Nights*, "in which I immersed myself so deeply I completely lost sight of reality. Eroticism and fantasy blew into my life with the force of a typhoon, erasing all limitations and turning the known order of things upside down" (153). Z. Nelly Martínez, in the aforementioned article, describes Allende's concept of Eros and its connection to writing and the feminine artist:

Also useful here is Michel Foucault's opposition between *ars erotica* and *scientia sexualis*, an opposition that brings attention to the repressive power of Western sexuality and to the liberating power of Eros. Thus Foucault equates (Western) knowledge with (patriarchal) might and sees art as expressive of Eros and hence as a liberating force. Free and creative. Eros is evidently subversive and hence demonic in the Western imagination. (291)

And thus it functions, for Eva is wrongly accused of Halabi's wife's death, arrested, tortured and driven out of town by people who cannot

understand the nature of her relationship with Halabí, but instead interpret it as a clandestine sexual liaison that causes Zulema's death.

Eva's last birth, as committed writer, is one that fuses both her erotic and intellectual being and brings together her personal relationship with Rolf and her source of inspiration in the collective unconscious:

*I awakened early.* It was a soft and slightly rainy Wednesday, not very different from others in my life, but I treasure that Wednesday as a special day, one that belonged only to me. I took a clean white sheet of paper—like a sheet freshly ironed for making love—and rolled it into the carriage. . . . I believed that that page has been waiting for me for more than twenty years, that I had lived only for that instant. . . . I wrote my name, and immediately the words began to flow, one thing linked to another and another. . . . I could see an order to the stories stored in my genetic memory since before my birth, and the many others I had been writing for years in my notebooks. (251)

When we examine the language used here and the language used later to describe Eva and Rolf, we see that both evoke the same suggestion of eternity and destiny:

He strode forward and kissed me exactly as it happens in romantic novels, exactly as I had been wanting him to do for a century, and exactly as I had been describing moments before in a scene between the protagonists of my *Bolero*. Once we were close, I was able unobtrusively to drink in the smell of the man, recognizing, at long last, the scent of the other half of my being. I understood then why from the first I thought I had known him before. (306)

What is just as interesting here, it seems to me, is the plenitude of existence that Eva experiences when she writes, the complete fulfillment of herself as a unique being: the day that belongs only to her and the fact that the mere inscription of her name calls forth her creations.

Naming: in the mythic consciousness the use of a name is a sacred ritual, calling what had previously been unnamed into existence, creating a destiny if given to a person. It is intimate, private and personal and speaks to the very core of a person's being. When Eva returns to the Indians at the end of the novel, she asks the name of one

of them whom she was sure she had previously known, “but El Negro had explained that it would be discourteous to ask. For these Indians, he said, to name is to touch the heart; they consider it offensive to call a stranger by name or to be named by him . . .” (276). With this sense of the sacred replacing the patriarchal appropriation signaled by a child’s taking of the name of the father, Eva’s name creates her destiny and marks her as a part of a larger community:

Her name will be Eva, so she will love life.

“And her last name?”

“None. Her father’s name isn’t important.”

“Everybody needs a last name. Only a dog can run around with one name.”

“Her father belonged to the Luna tribe, the Children of the Moon. Let it be Luna, then. Eva Luna. . . . (21)

Consuelo, too, is marked by her name: time and time again after her death Eva calls on her for strength, courage and guidance, and she even becomes a visible presence in much the same way as Eva’s characters who will invade her house and make a hurricane of chaos for Elvira to clean. Eva herself notes her mother’s destiny when she says that “she realized that the moment had come for her to justify the name Consuelo and console this man in his misfortune” (18). But Consuelo is not only defined by her name; she also embodies Jung’s collective unconscious, always present, never forgetting: “She placed at my feet the treasures of the Orient, the moon, and beyond. . . . she retained all the anecdotes she had heard and those she had learned in her readings. She manufactured the substance of her own dreams, and from those materials constructed a world for me” (22). We saw that this collective memory was part of the wellspring pouring from Eva’s writing of her name, and we later see that she in turn passes it on to Rolf: “*she understood that in her desire to please him she had given him her own memory: she no longer knew what was hers or how much now belonged to him; their pasts had been woven into a single strand*” (281).

The sense of time as being eternal and undifferentiated, flowing in a circular movement that subverts the Western idea of progress, evolution, sequence and non-connection, is explicitly elaborated in the first chapter of Genesis. Mircea Eliade, in his *Cosmos and History* (1959) characterizes it as sacred time, “in illo tempore.” In the Mission where Consuelo was raised, “time is bent and distances deceive the

human eye, persuading the traveler to wander in circles"; it is a Garden of Eden where "she roamed outdoors, sniffing the flora and the fauna, her mind filled with images, smells, colors, and myths borne on the river current" (2-3). This cyclical, repetitive, mythic time sense dominates the narrative, fusing the beginning and end of the novel, when Eva returns to the Indians (her origins) in the jungle close to Agua Santa and takes part in an act of political commitment that makes her part of a collective. Riad Halabí's gift of the belly dance, only to be performed for the man Eva loves, is a mirror of the tooth-shaped gold nugget given by El Portugués to Consuelo, who would wear it "until she met someone she would give it to as a gift of love" (4).

The belief in the unity of all things, this fusion and change, the non-discrimination between seeming opposites, also characterize the mythic world-view. Gender differences disappear and the animate/inanimate dichotomy as nature is invested with mystery, potential and life. Masculine and feminine principles metamorphose and meld, producing "mythological beings" (Mimí 253) more complete than either of the two genders: this may be the only way we can understand Mimí's puzzling decision not to take the step of having a vagina constructed, one that would finally complete her sex change. I would like to suggest that Riad Halabí embodies a feminine principle: he gives birth to Eva's second incarnation, thus fusing the father and mother into one. Highlighting the beginning of chapter six are words which seem somewhat disorienting when applied to a man: "*Riad Halabí was one of those persons who are undone by their own compassion*" (137). Although he has a successful businessman, most of what we know of him focuses on his sensitivity, gentleness, and emotional life, a focus most usually reserved for feminine characters. And in a foreshadowing of the end of the book, he incarnates a woman:

Sometimes he covered the lower half of his face with a dishcloth, in the manner of an odalisque's veil, and danced for me, clumsily, arms uplifted, belly gyrating wildly. So it was, amid shouts of laughter, that I learned the belly dance.

"It is a sacred dance—you will dance it only for the man you love most in your life," Riad Halabí told me. (154)

We can view Eva's time with Riad as an apprenticeship for her relationship with Rolf, who also embodies mythic and feminine principles of wholeness and fusion. This we have already seen in his

enactment of the myth that lovers are one soul split and thrown to separate parts of the earth, from which they must make their way back to each other to form a complete being. Throughout the novel, Eva's and Rolf's geographical, social, professional and personal orbits come ever closer. Emotions, not the intellect, rule Rolf's life: "He denied his emotions but at any unguarded time was demolished by them" (92).

On the other hand we have Huberto Naranjo who, despite his apparently revolutionary ideas, will never allow revolution in gender roles and relations, which makes a permanent relationship with Eva impossible: "For Naranjo and others like him, 'the people' seemed to be composed exclusively of men; we women should contribute to the struggle but were excluded from decision-making and power. His revolution would not change my fate in any fundamental way . . ." (233).

Allende here deconstructs the Western idea of transvestism/travesty with its emphasis on unnaturalness and evil, separation and otherness, and uses the mythic consciousness of Latin American history to change its polarity to plenitude and wholeness. On a smaller scale, this idea obtains throughout the novel, as prostitutes and transvestites become major commercial and social successes, delinquents and street roughs guerrilla heroes, and the picaresque adventure a romantic melodrama. Rupert's faith in cross-breeding to create the strongest and best breeds, the *madrina's* Siamese twins of different races and the use of the word "she" to refer back to the usually masculine "person," are examples in miniature (5).

Eva's experience of the mythic world unfolds in the first part of the novel, most specifically in the Genesis portion of the first chapter. Her stories form part of literary oral tradition. She learns the art of storytelling from her mother, learns to use her stories as tools of barter, survival, escape and emotional comfort, but it is not until chapter six, the exact mid-point of the novel, which takes place in Agua Santa, that she gains the skills of reading and writing.

### *Magical Realism*

Allende's acknowledgment of magical realism occurs both as specific references and in the creation of the microcosm of magical realism, La Colonia, where Eva's masculine counterpart, Rolf Carlé, grows up. There are clear allusions to the two foundational figures of magical realism in Latin America, Jorge Luis Borges and Alejo Carpentier. Carpentier's idea of "lo real maravilloso" is echoed by Eva

the first time she goes to La Colonia and says, "I had the feeling that I was in a world so new that sound had not yet been created" (294). Borges' idea of the simultaneity of times and spaces, most explicit in his short story, "El Aleph," (1948) is reflected in Eva's description of the garden in the Mission:

The world was bounded by the iron railings of the garden. Within them, time was ruled by caprice; in half an hour I could make six trips around the globe, and a moonbeam in the patio would fill my thoughts for a week. . . . Space expanded and contracted according to my will: the cubby beneath the stairs contained an entire planetary system, but the sky seen through the attic skylight was nothing more than a pale circle of glass. (25)

There seems to be no irony or parody in these descriptions, which is not the case in the extended meditation on La Colonia, which represents magical realism imposed from the outside. It is a fairytale village, a transplanted Austrian homeland marked by self-isolation and imposition, a place where no one speaks Spanish, and where many of the children have defects because of inbreeding, another reference, perhaps, to the Nazi policy of the "pure race" suggested by the concentration camp episode; a colony in Allende's damning terms (87). It is basically sterile, unreal, "preserved in a bubble where time had stopped and geography was illusory. . . . For Rolf it was like walking into a movie" (87). Aravena urges him to leave:

You can't stay in La Colonia forever, he said. It's fine for a neurotic like myself to come here and fortify my body and get the poisons out of my system, but no normal young man should live in this stage set. Rolf Carlé was familiar with the works of Shakespeare, Molière and Calderón de la Barca, but he had never been in a theater and could not see its relationship with the village. (101)

It seems significant that the three authors cited are not Latin American, but represent the three most important colonial powers, England, France and Spain. Rolf's knowledge of literature, then, has no connection with the world that surrounds him. Elzbieta Sklodowska suggests in an article on Miguel Barnet that "this perception . . . resembles the construction of the so-called magic realist narrative in that it frames the

'other' as fantastically exotic. What we get instead of difference is awkwardness" (39). Magical realism, then, in the context of La Colonia, is not indigenous but an overlay that represents the desire by outsiders to marginalize Latin America.

The authentically "magic" is Agua Santa. The road/threshold to and from it passes by the Palace of the Poor, which materializes and etherizes as a hallucinatory apparition. It is a microcosm of the *Arabian Nights*, dominated by the guiding force of the Arabian Riad Halabí. The differences between Agua Santa and La Colonia focus on the dichotomy between integration and domination: although not Hispanic, Riad integrates himself into the life of the community and becomes its guiding force in commerce, village improvements and education. He brings Eva there; the Indians come from the jungle every week and join them. The only person who does not become part of the community is his wife, Zulema, who ends up committing suicide. It is there that Eva discovers three magic forces in her life, reading, writing, and the erotic, while it is significant that no creation takes place in La Colonia. In Agua Santa, it is only when the forces of repression take over that everything changes, including the townspeople, and Eva is forced to leave.

### *The Boom*

No discussion of magical realism or the Boom can possibly take place without discussing Gabriel García Márquez and *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1970); it seemed at one point that no scholarship on Isabel Allende could take place either, particularly none on *The House of the Spirits*, without that same discussion (Agosín 1984, Coddou 1985, Marcos 1985, Rojas 1985, Urbina 1990). In *Eva Luna*, Allende parodies this obsession (and cites herself intratextually) through Mimí: "Ever since she had seen a line of people outside a bookstore waiting to have their books signed by a thickly mustached Colombian writer on a triumphal tour, she had showered me with notebooks, pencils and dictionaries. That's a good career, Eva. You don't have to get up too early and there's no one to order you around . . ." (225). Nonetheless, the marks of García Márquez remain evident: prolepses, levitations, fairies that appear in the surreal clarity of dusk, notebooks that encapsulate life, the military that tries to annihilate history, "wiping out entire tribes and erasing every trace of their passage on earth," a clear reference to the end of *One Hundred Years* (283). It is, then, not the influence of García Márquez to which Allende objects, but his patriar-

chal appropriation of all following writing and literature, whether explicitly fostered by him, by scholars, or by readers.

Other writers of the Latin American Boom, Isabel Allende's direct literary predecessors, can be read in *Eva Luna*. Several of the borrowings/allusions come from protagonists in major new novels: Alejandra of Ernesto Sábato's *On Heroes and Tombs* (1981) finds her way into Eva's soap opera *Bolero*; the transvestite La Manuela in José Donoso's *Hell has no Limits* (1972) is completely reinterpreted as Melesio/Mimí; Jorge Amado's *Gabriela: Clove and Cinnamon* (1962) resonates in Rolf's two cousins with their "natural aroma of cinnamon, clove, vanilla and lemon" (93, 173). The narrative structure of an interlocking soap opera narrative with an autofiction has a precedent in Mario Vargas Llosa's *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* (1982), and Alejo Carpentier's *Lost Steps* (1956) is mirrored in Eva's return to her Indian origins in the jungle: while there, she "re-gains" her life by resuming the menstrual periods that had ceased after Zulema's suicide but, like the protagonist in Carpentier's novel, she cannot stay and returns to her life in the city.

It could be argued that these are mere coincidences and show more of this writer's flights of fancy than any authorial intention. I would like to counter with the idea that the specular quality of the *Arabian Nights* profoundly informs this work, that *Eva Luna* explicitly is a coming to terms with the literary currents and movements of Latin American history, the closest of which, in chronological terms, is the Boom, and that the allusive interplay and resonating structure I have just mentioned is a way of forming an intertextual web that unites all of Latin American literature, a device which is totally compatible with the feminist ideology of fusion and integration I have been mentioning throughout this piece.

### Miscellany

Chapters three and five clearly embrace that paradigmatic Spanish form of literature, the picaresque, which Pilar V. Rotella defines in "Allende's *Eva Luna* and the Picaresque Tradition" as "that of an unheroic protagonist caught up in a chaotic world, enduring a series of adventures and encounters that make him both a victim of the world and its exploiter." Along with first-person point of view and episodic structure, "picaresque narratives often remain open-ended and often laced with interpolated tales . . ." (127). Allende reinterprets this genre in significant ways, most particularly the use of a feminine *pícaro* (not

without literary precedent but unusual), and the changeover of Eva from a picaresque character to a genuine heroine, one who risks her life and uses her narrative gifts for the service of others. With the changeover in the protagonist, the novel itself changes modalities, a transformation that Rotella aptly describes: "Eva Luna's and her friends' efforts to create a better world by destroying at least one bastion of political oppression and, especially, her own surrender to—supposedly—extra-ordinary love and lasting happiness, lead toward the idealized vision of romance" (133). The romance modality, too, undergoes important changes in the hands of Eva and Allende, as it remains firmly planted in reality. One of the characteristics of Eva's stories is the elimination of characters polarized into villains and heroes/heroines. The traditional romance/soap opera ending of "happily ever after" is replaced by a more realistic ending, one which she suggests is more suited to her morbid temperament. It is also one which is often more feminist in its overtones and, as such, is not at all pleasing to Huberto Naranjo. The ending of *Eva Luna* itself is ambiguous, with the traditional happy ending suggested as only one of several equal possibilities.

The romance polarized characterization is mirrored in the polarized thematics of the regional novel, which has often been implicitly subtitled "civilization and barbarism." The first story Eva tells Rolf and Aravena begins thus: "*Times were hard in the south. Not in the south of this country, but the south of the world, where seasons are reversed and winter does not occur at Christmastime as it does in civilized nations, but in the middle of the year, as in barbaric lands. . . .*" (255). This allusion is not only to the internal geography of Latin American literary history but to the same spirits that see Latin America as a barbaric/exotic land, framing it in the same way as do the magical realist narratives we have already discussed.

Literature of the dictators, with a long history in Latin America and a more recent flowering in the 1980s, at which time many of the major Boom writers penned such works, is also cited in *Eva Luna*: the figure of El Benefactor who could not be buried because the people would not believe that "the tyrant's immortality was only a myth," shows in a humorous way the logical consequences of the mythification of a person, a mythification which is too often used for repressive ends (16). But Allende here, as she does in the ending of *The House of the Spirits*, suggests that there is a way out: in *The House of the Spirits*, Alba breaks the evolutionary pattern of crime, oppression and revenge by deciding

not to hate her torturers; in *Eva Luna*, the Minister of Defense, who knows all about her, her contacts with the guerrillas, and her use of *Bolero* to disseminate the truth, does not arrest her but requests her mediation to reach an agreement with them.

The reverse side of this literature, what we have come to call testimonial, embodies one of the primary themes of *Eva Luna*, memory, and the resurrection of lost and never-heard voices. From the beginning of this novel, memory takes its place as a life-sustaining force: Consuelo tells Eva that she never will die if Eva continues to remember her; Eva writes from the "genetic memory" which has been passed on to her by her mother; she re-creates her own and others' memories so that they become positive rather than negative remembrances; she passes on to and fuses her memories with Rolf until they are one. Allende's long, allusive meditations on Latin American literary history ensure that this history, too, will remain alive. In the novel, Eva tries to avoid telling about Zulema and her lover, Kamal, but comes to the following conclusion: "My first thought was that if we kept silent, it would be as if nothing had happened—what is not voiced scarcely exists; silence would gradually erase everything, and the memory would fade" (165-66). Without memory, without voice, without stories, life ceases.

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Note: Dates in brackets refer to first Spanish edition.

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