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The Invisible Crowd: Individual and Multitude in Roberto Bolaño's *2666*

by

Francisco Brito

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

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in the

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of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Francine Masiello, Chair

Professor Estelle Tarica

Professor Tom McEnaney

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The Invisible Crowd: Individual and Multitude in Roberto Bolaño's *2666*  
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## Abstract

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This dissertation argues that Roberto Bolaño's novel *2666* offers us a new way of thinking about the relationship between the individual and the multitude in the globalized world. I argue that the novel manages to capture the oppressive nature of its structures not by attempting to represent them directly but instead by telling the stories of individuals who feel especially alienated from them. These characters largely fail to connect with one another in any lasting way, but their brief encounters, some of which take place in person, others through reading, have pride of place in a text that, I propose, constitutes a brief on behalf of the marginal and the forgotten in its overall form: it is an example of the novel as an ever-expanding, multitudinous crowd; it strives to preserve the singularity of each of its members while at the same time suggesting that the differences between them are less important than their shared presence within a single narrative whole. I proceed by examining these characters in all their particularity and closely reading the novel's key scenes, in which they meet one another, while also tracking how these characters and encounters are paradigmatic of different ways of relating. Chapter 1, "Insufferable Hierarchies," focuses on *2666*'s most bookish characters and their rage for "greatness," exploring how literature in the novel both enlarges the moral imagination of certain characters and curdles that of others. My second chapter, "Women in the Shape of Monsters," is centered on the novel's least bookish stretch, the famous middle section about the murdered women of Santa Teresa. It examines how the fight waged by that section's living women against gendered violence runs up against patriarchal power and the overwhelming burden of having to represent or avenge their murdered sisters. In "Everything in Anything," my final chapter, I explore how the novel—itsself a storehouse of miscellaneous but true information—allows its characters to form multi-generational and trans-historical bonds through the sharing of random facts and by unsystematic but assiduous reading in marginal spaces. In a brief coda, I argue that *2666*'s ethics and poetics require both an openness to the possibility of change and a commitment to one's particular way of being.

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## Introduction

### A Book of Encounters

*2666* is a massive complex of novels populated by a wealth of characters. With one exception, central in several ways, it tells the stories of writers of different kinds: academic critics, a philosopher, a journalist, a very enigmatic novelist. It tells their stories without, however, attempting to represent the larger field of cultural production. When it makes connections, it makes them between isolated individuals, never between communities or institutions. Its first two novel-length sections are about academics, but the novel is utterly unconcerned with the university. And the writer whose biography it concludes with is unsocial to the point of unworldliness. *2666* covers much geographic and historical ground but it does so while tightly fixed on its individual characters. Its thousand pages contain no accounts of great public events of any kind. It certainly reckons with the aftermath of mass violence, but it doesn't depict it; the act of horror is perpetually held right beyond the edge of the narrative frame. Its thematic concerns might be world-historical but its storytelling method is stringently intimate.

This dissertation is about this paradoxical narrative individualism. It examines how a book with such a broad range of stories featuring so many different people and so evidently concerned with the particular places and times in which these stories take place can simultaneously give the impression that what ultimately matters is the destiny of the isolated individual. My main contention about the novel is that its great pathos derives from this central tension between the sense the reader has that this book, when considered as a whole, teems with life, and the individual narratives of death-haunted solitude that make it up. *2666* is so difficult to read because it's an unforgiving depiction of how rotten and cruel our world is that appears to offer very little hope that it can be radically changed. At no point in its ocean of stories is there any moment at which one feels that the tide is turning and that a different world is possible. Jean Franco, in her essay "Questions for Bolaño," puts this forcefully when she contrasts Bolaño's work with that of writer-activists who clearly believe that "action to right wrongs can be meaningful" (216).

I concede that concerted right action is almost wholly absent from the story world of *2666*, but I don't ultimately agree that the book amounts to a nihilistic celebration of a march into an abyss (to use the figure that Franco borrows from the phantasmagoric ending to Bolaño's novella *Amuleto*). Crucially, the book doesn't really describe *action* at all. It's not a novel filled with action in the culture industry sense: for all that it's suffused with violence, almost none of it is narrated in any kind of detail. The one Tarantino-esque scene in "The Part About the Crimes," wherein Lalo Cura gets involved in a hyper-detailed action-movie shootout, feels designed to draw our attention to how little of that there is elsewhere in a book that shares so many elements with hugely popular *narconovelas*. Nor, as Franco points out, does it contain any action in the sense of activism. When we hear in passing that there is a group agitating against the Santa Teresa femicides under the name "Mujeres en Acción" it's because one of the characters whose story we're tracking, the psychiatrist Elvira Campos, catches one of their rallies on TV and feels put off by what they're doing (for reasons that I'll get into in Chapter Two).

Instead of that kind of public action, the novel is made up of a huge number of one-to-one encounters. Quite often these occur face to face but in many crucial instances they're mediated by the written word. Sometimes characters meet one another incidentally because one character is desperately searching for someone else. In other cases, characters will find a text that feels like

it speaks to him or her alone, whether it's a private diary or a widely-published novel or poem. The encounter is the most common and meaningful event that happens in the novel, but the novel is not made up of encounters alone. Instead, in every case, the novel's third-person narrator will pick up the story of an individual character and then tell his or her story pithily up to the point when they meet someone new, whether on the street or on the page. In the course or in the aftermath of this kind of encounter the novel tends to break free from the naturalism it otherwise pursues in order to register how outlandish it can be to come into contact with someone new. In many cases, that contact takes place on the page; the novel posits that a literary meeting can be as bracing as a physical one. Here, on one of the novel's first pages, is the British academic Liz Norton's reaction upon reading a novel by Archimboldi: "En el patio cuadrulado llovía, el cielo cuadrulado parecía el rictus de un robot o de un dios hecho a nuestra semejanza... el pasto y la tierra parecían hablar, no, hablar no, discutir, y sus palabras ininteligibles eran como telarañas cristalizadas o brevísimos vómitos cristalizados" (23).<sup>1</sup> The content of the Archimboldi novel Norton has just read remains as mysterious as this hallucination. but the intensity of her experience of reading it comes across, spectacularly. The giant face of the robot or god and the chatting landscape, bizarre as they are, also capture the way in which ordinary individuals become stranger and larger than life to the book's characters.

But not just to them, to us the readers as well. The final novel of the quintet that makes up *2666*, "The Part About Archimboldi," spends hundreds of pages telling the life story of the very tall German peasant boy who becomes the peripatetic, un-trackable cult writer. Even after spending so much time with him—more than we spend with anyone else in the novel—he remains at heart a mystery. This is the case, in large part, because his "Part" of the novel, no more belongs to him than "The Part About the Critics" belongs to them or "The Part About Fate" does to its titular journalist. As I've hinted at above, the novel is really about what we could call intersubjectivity if the subjects weren't themselves displaced from the center of the text by their fascinations with others. Specifically, with strange seekers, with isolatoes, to borrow Melville's lovely word, as alienated as they are.

But for all that the novel is stitched together by a long sequence of intimate summits, it doesn't read like the coming together of a confederation. When two characters in *2666* meet, they're often preoccupied with obsessive, invidious comparison. As I'll track throughout this thesis, and its first two chapters in particular, many of these lonely people are overwhelmingly concerned with how they measure up to others whom they might consider competitors: fellow writers, fellow women, etc. Because they're not engaged in the kind of ordinary rat races they might be engaged in if they cared more about professional advancement or wealth or fame, the novel's characters become fixated on finding standards for comparison that go beyond the ordinary social world. Literature plays a double role here: for some characters, it affords a transcendental standard for distinction; for others, it gives conclusive proof of the essential equality between human beings.

This is the focus of "Insufferable Hierarchies," my first chapter. In it, I look at the different ways that a group of far-flung litterateurs consider their self-worth in light of standards of value that are radically distinct from those that obtain in the actually-existing World Republic of Letters. The chapter tracks how ambiguous their desire to value themselves anew appears. On the one hand, the real-world standards are indefensible insofar as they're obviously detached

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<sup>1</sup> It was raining in the quadrangle, and the quadrangular sky looked like the grimace of a robot or a god made in our own likeness... the grass and the earth seemed to talk, no, not talk, argue, their incomprehensible words like crystallized spiderwebs or the briefest crystallized vomitings." (9)



from anything but the kind of entrenched power that sustains all hierarchies. On the other, the obsession with finding different, “deeper” or “higher” standards for something like literary worth can lead to a belief in the absolute superiority of the few greats over the ordinary many, as in the paradigmatic case of the nameless old man in Cologne who gives Archimboldi both his typewriter and a speech about the hard truths he’s learned about “greatness.” But a hyper-awareness of where one might fit into the great mass of writers and readers can also lead to the opposite valuation of obscurity or apparent insignificance. I explore this second, more egalitarian worldview in my readings of Amalfitano and Archimboldi. Which isn’t to say that the novel’s characters can be easily sorted into good and bad, or elitists and egalitarians. One of the novel’s persistent, disquieting intimations is that almost anyone is or can be both.

I begin to examine this problem at the close of Chapter One, which examines how *2666* ends with a subtly damning reminder that Archimboldi, the closest thing the novel has to a hero, completely abandons his little sister Lotte for the sake of his literary career. Lotte’s story demonstrates how, for all that the novel’s motley cast tends to seek out the margins of society, no one within it can exist outside the social world and the systems that govern it. This is the focus of my second chapter, “Women in the Shapes of Monsters,” which examines the ways that the female characters who step to the fore in the novel’s central section, “The Part About the Crimes,” are variously affected by patriarchal violence and domination. It may appear perverse on my part to approach this, the novel’s infamous dark heart, by largely bracketing the scores of young women whose brutal murders punctuate these stories in order to demonstrate both the totalizing reach of the gender system’s violence—each of these redoubtable women, from the expert psychiatrist Elvira Campos to congresswoman Azucena Esquivel Plata, the single character in *2666* with the most real-world power, has her life broken by it—and what survival and even resistance can look like. The chapter also explores how ambivalent the trope of monstrosity truly is in the novel. The murderers and rapists, the true authors of the crimes, are figured as monsters, but so are each of these women who hope to oppose them. This opposition, this action to right unspeakable wrongs, is deferred beyond the edge of the page, but it occasionally feels like a real possibility because of the power with which these women’s solidarity and indignation are evoked.

“Everything in Anything,” my third and final chapter, shifts the focus slightly from the kind of radical action which might be yet to come to examine a category of small, good thing that *is* persistently and lovingly depicted throughout *2666*: the sharing of random facts as a way of establishing a common world. This chapter branches out to include a number of exchanges about the most disparate topics—the disparateness being what matters—but it begins with and consistently returns to a secular sermon given by the black militant Barry Seaman in a Detroit church because it’s a speech that in both form and content exemplifies an openness to the wondrous heterogeneity of the world. I discuss this receptivity to all kinds of information as a kind of encyclopedism, but one that abjures the desire to encompass all knowledge. What matters in each of the scenes I analyze here is how the stray quantum of knowledge, whether about a book or the natural world or about how to cook a particular dish, makes possible a connection between one individual and another. In most of these cases a link is formed across eras—the imprisoned Seaman finds solace in the lucid essays of Voltaire, the very young Archimboldi finds a kindred spirit in the medieval knight and poet Wolfram von Eschenbach, the Italian Archimboldian Morini helps assuage the pain of a London beggar named Dick by reading him the names of recipes by Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz—and the eye-blink temporality of the

moments of discovery or exchange is contrasted with the years of living and reading that it took someone to immerse him- or herself in a topic.

In fact, in a tendency that I trace through all three chapters, a great many of the small associations that help to ward off despair and to carve out small pockets of hope involve a much older or more experienced person offering advice or earned wisdom to a much younger one. Throughout this thesis I often reach for a set of paired labels that characterize the types that Bolaño tends to deploy. The encounters that most read like aleph-like reductions of the novel tend to occur between *seekers* in search of their cult heroes and *oracles* who attempt to momentarily capture that cultic aura. These rhetorical performances also tend to directly raise one of the questions at the very heart of my inquiry insofar as they dramatize the two contradictory ideas about individuals that the novel seems to always put forth at the same time: (1) that only some people are singular, special, monsters of nature who are in this wretched world but not truly of it; and (2) that anyone, really, has the potential to be the astounding proof to somebody else that they don't need to be merely beaten down by whatever local pressures shape their lives.

It's at the level of its overall form, i.e. by being one and many itself and by kaleidoscopically playing off the extraordinary against the banal, that *2666* most fully engages with this tension. And this is something that it can only do because of its massive scale. Some of its most powerful effects—the way it pushes us into moral numbness and back out again to horror by exhaustively cataloging every femicide in Santa Teresa; its conferral of real pathos on a group of cartoonishly smug and self-involved academics; its handling of Archimboldi, who somehow remains an enigma even after the full account of his life story—could only be accomplished at novel length and are all the more powerful because they constitute a part of a larger, extravagant whole. This is why I believe that the most obvious fact about *2666*, its sheer length, is so central to its moral and political meaning. Its thousand pages allow it to cover enough diverse ground for it to feel overwhelming in a way that suggests the global. This is the sense in which it is radically different from most of the global Latin American fictions that Héctor Hoyos discusses in his *Beyond Bolaño: The Global Latin American Novel*. *2666* contains many of the compressed synecdoches for the globe that Hoyos, adapting Borges, calls “alephs”—this dissertation is, in part, an examination of these passages—but its overall narrative strategy is expansive rather than contractive. And the expansion is always in the direction of including more individuals rather than social formations. And in eschewing the representation of the systems that structure the global order and its elite managers for the intimate perspectives of variously self-aware marginal figures, it captures what it's like to live under capitalism and patriarchy at the turn of the millennium.

### **Amalfitano's Fight, And Ours**

So far, I've attempted to capture this dissertation's mapping of *2666* by summarizing its organizing ideas. For the remainder of this introduction, I'd like to give a preview of what the main body of this thesis reads like by close-reading a single brief scene that serves as a knot that brings together these threads about sprawl and compression, one and many, individual and multitude, writing and commonality and resistance. Having paid the scene minute attention, I'll shuttle back to the broad questions that it raises, but I want to tarry with its every detail because I believe that of the most powerful aspects of Bolaño's work is the density and ambiguity that he infuses into so many of the scenes that he writes. The master trope of this study is the

synecdoche because Bolaño manages to compact the manifold energies of his great book into a whole series of brief scenes.

The scene I analyze here is especially brief and especially suggestive. I want to scrutinize it because it raises the questions listed above but also because it appears as a diptych about the book and the world. Its first part contains *2666*'s most succinct account of what literature, and long, multifarious novels in particular, can do for us in our alienation. Its second part demonstrates that the extravagant claims made on behalf of literature don't occur in a vacuum. With all the condensed power of dream logic, it identifies the key features of the novel's historical and political context.

The scene unspools in the head of one of the novel's chief isolatoes, the exiled, unraveling Chilean philosophy professor Óscar Amalfitano, who hears a young protégé of his mention the name of the Austrian poet Georg Trakl and immediately begins to reminisce about a bookish young pharmacist who used to attend to him when he lived in Barcelona and who had expressed a particular taste for reading novellas. I describe Amalfitano's overall story arc in greater detail in Chapter One; for now, I want to focus on the element that's been wrenched free from its equivocal context to be used in a hundred reviews and celebrations of Bolaño as his literary credo: Amalfitano's lament that this *joven farmacéutico ilustrado*, who may have been Trakl and who might yet write "desperate" poetry in the vein of his "distant Austrian colleague," "prefers the minor to the major work" (289). The passage then glosses this distinction by both citing examples of both categories—"Bartleby" and *Moby Dick*, *The Metamorphosis* and *The Trial*—and emphasizing how readerly and writerly greatness is predicated on a form of physical bravery:

Ya ni los farmacéuticos ilustrados se atreven con las grandes obras, imperfectas, torrenciales, las que abren camino en lo desconocido. Escogen los ejercicios perfectos de los grandes maestros. O lo que es lo mismo: quieren ver a los grandes maestros en sesiones de esgrima de entrenamiento, pero no quieren saber nada de los combates de verdad, en donde los grandes maestros luchan contra aquello, ese aquello que nos atemoriza a todos, ese aquello que acoquina y encacha, y hay sangre y heridas mortales y fetidez. (289-290)<sup>2</sup>

This *cri de coeur* perfectly captures how *2666* can so often feel like both an assault on the idea of the exceptional individual and its celebration. Yes, even a humble pharmacist can participate in the agonistic struggle that characterizes greatness, but were he to develop the courage to do so, he'd enter the fight alone. He'd be participating in a grand tradition of resistance but it would just be him against something as huge and overdetermined in its horror as *The White Whale*.

But of course, this isn't the last word in Amalfitano's desire. His section doesn't end with his fantasy of tragic bloody combat but with another, more comedic if equally disturbing vision. This vision, also explicitly inspired by his protégé's *altisonantes*, "high-sounding" words, doesn't involve a near-stranger from Amalfitano's past, at least not at first. It takes place on a rose marble patio and stars "the last communist philosopher of the twentieth century" (290), a

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<sup>2</sup> "Now even bookish pharmacists are afraid to take on the great, imperfect, torrential works, books that blaze paths into the unknown. They choose the perfect exercises of the great masters. Or what amounts to the same thing: they want to watch the great masters spar, but they have no interest in real combat, when the great masters struggle against that something, that something that terrifies us all, that something that cows us and spurs us on, amid blood and mortal wounds and stench." (227)

drunk, maladroit figure who bumbles through an eerie red light, singing a deeply sad song, mostly in Russian (a language inscrutable to the dreamer) before revealing himself to be an end-times figure indeed: Boris Yeltsin. Amalfitano is lucid enough to wonder at his unconscious's bizarre conflation of Yeltsin and "communism's last philosopher," but he doesn't experience this as a nightmare; in fact, the encounter affords him "a sense of light well-being, as if he were a feather" (290). When this chimera speaks, it addresses Amalfitano as "comrade" and reveals to him "the third leg of the human table":

La vida es demanda y oferta, u oferta y demanda, todo se limita a eso, pero así no se puede vivir. Es necesaria una tercera pata para que la mesa no se desplome en los basurales de la historia, que a su vez se está desplomando permanentemente en los basurales del vacío. Así que toma nota. Ésta es la ecuación: oferta + demanda + magia. ¿Y qué es magia? Magia es épica y también es sexo y bruma dionisiaca y juego. (291)<sup>3</sup>

Like many of the speeches in *2666*, this reads like equal parts real inspiration and mystifying nonsense. Before turning to the message, however, I'd like to spend more time with the messenger. As in the torrential-books reverie, this one involves Amalfitano's perception that a double identity is in play here: this time it's not a bookish pharmacist who could also be the second coming of Georg Trakl, but rather the apparent last avatar of communism who turns out to be the gravedigger for political liberation produced by the very Soviet system that once stood for it. But while the pharmacist retains great potential—he might yet be a Trakl—this bathetic huckster is a familiar figure in Bolaño's demonology: the weak-willed, once-leftist sellout common to both Santiago and Moscow: "Esos mismos que entonces no levantaron la voz para defender a Reinaldo Arenas y que hoy se acomodan como putines en la nueva situación" (*Entre paréntesis*, 201).<sup>4</sup> It's telling that Yeltsin is one of the very few political figures of global importance who gets name-checked in this novel of a thousand names (Osama bin Laden is another). He is, after all, a true representative man of the novel's central chronotope: the end-of-history premillennial nineties. And though he may be farcical—Amalfitano sees him in his most caricatured, drunk, and melancholy Russian guise—what he represents is one of the chief candidates for that "aquello" that Amalfitano wants to fight: untrammelled neoliberal capitalism. He is thus a walking contradiction: a speaker for the new dawn of Capital in Russia and for the waning movement that sought to combat it.

And that's why the advice he gives to a cowed Amalfitano is both a weak truth—namely, that life can and ought to be moved by more than just economic rationality—and a strong lie—the idea that the mystifications of neoclassical economics are fully two thirds of life. Ultimately, what the Yeltsin-Communist Philosopher demon is offering Amalfitano is the option of acquiescing to the world as it is and making do. Yes, Capital is triumphant everywhere but we can endure the prospect of there being no alternative if we make room for all the irrational abandon signified by "magic." In this, he at least acknowledges that his way of thinking does not encompass every human need or desire. It's worth comparing this vision of the "twentieth

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<sup>3</sup> "Life is demand or supply or supply and demand, that's what it all boils down to, but that's no way to live. A third leg is needed to keep the table from collapsing into the garbage pit of history, which in turn is permanently collapsing into the garbage pit of the void. So take note. This is the equation: supply + demand + magic. And what is magic? Magic is epic and it's also sex and Dionysian mists and play." (228)

<sup>4</sup> "Those same types who never raised their voice to defend Reinaldo Arenas and that now fit in like putines in the new situation" (translation mine).

century's last communist philosopher" with the classic picture of bourgeois idealism captured by the nineteenth century's first communist philosopher:

The sphere of circulation or commodity exchange, within whose boundaries the sale and purchase of labour-power goes on, is in fact a very Eden of the innate rights of man. It is the exclusive realm of Freedom, Equality, Property and Bentham. Freedom, because both buyer and seller of a commodity, let us say labour-power, are determined only by their own free will. They contract as free persons, who are equal before the law. Their contract is final result in which their joint will finds a common legal expression. Equality, because each enters into relation with the other, as with a simple owner of commodities, and they exchange equivalent for equivalent. Property, because each disposes only of what is his own. And Bentham, because each looks only to his own advantage. The only force bringing them together, and putting them into relation with each other, is his selfishness, the gain and the private interest of each. Each pays heed to himself only, and no one worries about the others. And precisely for that reason, either in accordance with the pre-established harmony of things, or under the auspices of an omniscient providence, they all work together to their mutual advantage, for the common weal, and in the common interest. (*Capital: Volume 1* 280)

From the postlapsarian late twentieth century, the voice of Capital can no longer pretend that the invisible hand ensures that individual self-interest leads to the common good. But the supplemental magic that it recommends as the way to stabilize the system still perfectly fits within the same narrowly individualistic frame. Make sure you do drugs and have adventures and sex, it says: that is all you can know on earth, and all you need to know.

Stepping back, we can see that Marco Antonio Guerra's nihilistic disdain for both the modern world and for any attempt to change it spurs Amalfitano's unconscious into showing him two distinct paths. He can either stand up to what's out there and fight, or he can trick himself into accepting the horror with a little magic. If he doesn't choose the brave confrontation, he'll end up like Guerra, who combines the worst of his reminiscence—like the bookish pharmacist, he prefers art that ignores the unspeakable Something that's out there—and of his dream—like the Yeltsin demon, he's given up on changing the world. Though saying that he must choose one path or another as if they were presented to him for the first time isn't quite right. It would be more accurate to say that Guerra is reminding Amalfitano that he can opt out of a struggle he's been carrying on for years.

This is why the temptation runs in this particular order. Challenged by a young man proud of having given up all illusions of justice, Amalfitano first remembers another young man who could have maintained a readerly engagement with the world but chose not to and then dreams of the drunken middle-aged man who has benefited tremendously from his acquiescence and who tries to sell him on his newly attenuated, and profitable, world-view. It matters that the vision of a lone hero standing up to the horror by creating or reading great masterpieces is followed by an image of the cooptation of collective struggle by the powers that be. And while it's clear that the reverie on the "great, torrential works" contains a kind of *ars poetica*, a litany of what a great novel can be, the Yeltsin figure also does a fair job of describing what the atomized individuals that populate *2666* get up to. Epic adventure, sex, Dionysian abandon, play: characters in the novel engage in all of these desperately, even compulsively, without ever really achieving the kind of peace that the demon promises they deliver.

Beyond that, the libidinal excess proposed as a stabilizing agent has a tendency of becoming something far more sinister. From the chilling early incident when two of our good, bourgeois critic-protagonists beat a Pakistani cab driver half to death in an erotic frenzy to the epidemic of sexual violence in Santa Teresa, the novel is permeated by examples of “magic” gone dark. The reason for this is that to accept the individual frame wherein two thirds of human life is rational economic exchange is to buy into the mystification that obscures the very real differences that individuals bring to the table. As I’ve suggested, what the Yeltsin demon is presenting Amalfitano is an updated version of the fantasy that Marx skewered in the above-cited passage on the views of the “free trader *vulgaris*,” a passage that marks the key transition point in Volume 1 of *Capital* from the examination of the sphere of circulation to the realm of production. Marx’s preview of the transformation that occurs once we enter the “hidden abode of production” (279) reads like one of the ominous unmaskings that punctuate *2666*:

a certain change takes place, or so it appears, in the physiognomy of our *dramatis personae*. He who was previously the money-owner now strides in front as a capitalist; the possessor of labour-power as his worker. The one smirks self-importantly and is intent on business; the other is timid and holds back, like one who has brought his own hide to market and now has nothing else to expect but—a tanning. (280)

Marx the economist spends most of the rest of his thousand-page summa in that realm of production, describing how individuals who appear to be equal before the law are rendered so vastly unequal by the dark magic of capitalism. Bolaño the novelist largely respects the sign that reads “No admittance except on business” (280). He tells stories that happen near the maquiladoras but he never takes us inside. Instead, he describes the sphere of the circulation of cult texts that aren’t successful as commodities. And his *dramatis personae* is composed of individuals with hybrid class identities. As mentioned above, *2666* features very few capitalists or workers from traditional industries. The former make cameo appearances from time to time, but they never carry a story or speak their piece directly. When the latter appear, more often than not they’ve already been killed.

As I’ve been suggesting, the characters who *do* feature within the novel can’t be easily classified as victims or exploiters. Like Amalfitano at the end of his section, they face a live decision about how they’re going to face this ruthless world. Asked by Mónica Maristain what he thinks hell is like, Bolaño replies: “Como Ciudad Juárez, que es nuestra maldición y nuestro espejo, es espejo desasosegado de nuestras frustraciones y de nuestra infame interpretación de la libertad y de nuestros deseos” (*Entre paréntesis*, 339).<sup>5</sup> “Our odious interpretation of freedom”—he doesn’t split an us off from a them. Jean Franco cites this response by way of setting up her final “question for Bolaño” in an article of that name: “What curbs that unrestricted freedom that leads to violence? Not religion or political belief, nor some universal precept. In *2666*, ‘good’ people like Rosa Amalfitano and Fate can easily slip over the edge. No one is safe. So my final question is whether in this voluntaristic universe there is no alternative but to march heroically onwards towards nowhere” (215). Franco would go on to give a much more positive account of the novel in *Cruel Modernity*, but her conclusion in this piece is that “Bolaño often sounds like a romantic anarchist” with little or no faith in “the view that action to right wrongs can be meaningful” (216). She closes the already-quite Bolañesque article—skeptical about the

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<sup>5</sup> “Like Juárez, which is out damnation and our mirror, is an uneasy mirror of our frustrations and our odious interpretation of freedom and of our desires” (translation mine).

romanticization of his life in the popular press, she touchingly wishes she could resurrect him and make him answer the pressing questions she has for him—with a literary-historical vision that reads like a riff from one of his characters' speeches:

The ending of *Amuleto* has the young people marching towards the abyss. The narrator knew “que pese a caminar juntos no constituían lo que comúnmente se llama una masa: sus destinos no estaban imbricados en una idea común. Los unía sólo su generosidad y su valentía” (152). In other words, they are without a common goal. Can this be the exodus? Or do that “generosity” and “valor” belong to an earlier age? It is Shelley and Mary that I see marching along and perhaps dragging Byron reluctantly behind. (216)

I take Franco's reading of Bolaño's political unconscious seriously because there's a lot to it. Chris Andrews isn't wrong when he writes, in a similar vein, that “insofar as it privileges voluntary associations over hierarchical institutions, Bolaño's fiction has an anarchist ethos” (186). Franco and Andrews are certainly correct about Bolaño's fictional depiction of mass political organizing. As noted above, he tends to ignore the parties and movements people join. And when he depicts their adherents, it's as traitorous “putines” who have abandoned their principles in order to secure a position of personal power, or as mirror-images of their authoritarian enemies—the murder of Roque Dalton by his comrades recurs throughout his oeuvre as paradigmatic of the betrayal latent within organized struggle.

That said, “romantic anarchism” only applies to *2666* in particular if both of its terms are highly qualified. Romanticism as a movement and an era does have a special resonance for the Bolaño of *2666*—in Chapter Two I discuss the remarkable interpolation of Leopardi's “Night Song of the Wandering Shepherd of Asia,” the single lyric quoted at length in the novel's thousand pages—but Franco's image of Shelley, Mary, and Byron suggests a focus on doomed literary youth that he'd mostly moved away from after *Detectives*. The shift between that novel and its pendant *Amuleto* is instructive here. The latter book is focalized through Auxilio Lacouture, the much older “mother of Mexican poetry” whose heroic resistance during the Tlatelolco Massacre involved occupying a stall in the Faculty of Arts and Letters and writing poetry. Already there, Bolaño chooses to tell the story of the heroic misfit who attempts to mentor the young and who holds on to the belief that another world is possible. When her story ends with the vision cited by Franco, Auxilio suggests that there is a “we” that ought to be inspired by the song of the children marching towards the abyss: “ese canto es nuestro amuleto” (154).<sup>6</sup> As mentioned above, an idea of Bolaño's that I'll return to time and again in this dissertation is that inter-generational education must work both ways: young people have much to learn from the tenacity of their elders and the wisdom they've accumulated over their lifetimes. At the same time, the survivors have a lot to learn from the idealism of the young.

All of which brings us back to that other, very different vision of a singing figure disappearing into an abyss. We leave Auxilio with a heart filled by the martyrdom of a lost generation. Amalfitano, by contrast, is baffled and cowed by the exit of the Yeltsin ghost, who lustily reprises his sad Russian song after delivering his cynical advice and disappears into what's either a crater or a latrine (291). The affective distance between the surprisingly inspirational sentimentality of the close of Auxilio's self-designated “horror” story—its titular final word marked as what we ought to take away from it—to Amalfitano's indecision when presented with Guerra's apolitical cynicism and Yeltsin's accommodation to the new

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<sup>6</sup> “That song is our amulet” (185)

dispensation might be great, but they both read as reminders that the struggle goes on. We're undoubtedly near an abyss, the late Bolaño's open-ended stories suggest, and many of our young people have gone over its edge, but that's all the more reason for us to keep fighting.

That is why it feels unfair to criticize Bolaño for lionizing the spirit of an earlier age. But what about the related charge that he, like his doomed young heroes, never came of political age and that the kind of rebellion that he valorizes is irresponsible insofar as it has nothing to teach us about how to change this world? This line of critique is also present in Franco's "Questions" and is powerfully expressed in Gareth Williams's "Sovereignty and Melancholic Paralysis in Roberto Bolaño." Williams argues that Bolaño's "political affect and solidarity" is exhausted by his "constant return to the tragic victims and melancholic plight of lives captured in, and abandoned by, a temporal despotism that guarantees the return of the fascist state of exception" (138) and suggests that this paralysis constitutes an abdication of a responsibility to think otherwise, to imagine a better world. This is the conclusion of his essay:

Bolaño might point to the absurdity or injustice of the geometry of hostility to which he is drawn over and over again. But he still remains ensconced within it. In the parallel lives Bolaño creates there is certainly plenty of fraternity and equality. However, for there to be freedom he would have had to engage actively in the narrative deconstruction of the inherited trenches and fortifications of the friend/enemy divide, rather than recurring to its melancholic reassembly time and time again, in an eternal return of the same with only nominal difference. It provides for good literature, without doubt. But I think a question remains as to whether it is good enough. (138-9)

Williams might be right that the texts of Bolaño's that he's critiquing are fundamentally backwards-facing and that they evoke a sense of the inevitable return of fascist repression. The way that *2666* is centered on an ongoing catastrophe of the present makes it different, however. The monsters that abound in Santa Teresa and elsewhere are not the butchers of a past generation of young people, they're exercising their horrific freedom *today*, in ways that are not just repetitions of the past. And in the face of that, mustering a crowd of people who intensely feel fraternity and equality might be a precondition for thinking about what freedom might mean. Or, put another way, *2666* captures the small realms of freedom that its many characters are capable of constructing on the realm of necessity.

And that freedom does have the potential of lapsing into the "terrible interpretation of freedom" that fuels the murderers and rapists in the novel. Bolaño is indeed deconstructing the Schmittian notion of the political as friend and enemy. He does so by elaborating the opposition between dominator and dominated, the great and the run-of-the-mill, across several different realms. And while the signal injustice that he chronicles is that a few have come to believe and act as if they possess total freedom and are absolutely superior to the many, most of his characters are capable of shuttling between the two classes, the all-powerful and the victimized. In the passage of her "Questions" essay in which Franco criticizes Bolaño for reducing all hope for transformative change to "personal morality," she laments that "in *2666*, 'good' people like Rosa Amalfitano and Fate can easily slip over the edge" (215). I think that is exactly right, but I believe that that ever-present threat of moral failure is the site of the novel's strength as an inquiry into morality and politics. By ruling out the unmistakable monsters and abject victims as protagonists, the novel preserves a fundamental tension and avoids a simplistic kind of allegorizing about good and bad people.



Having taken this long detour through the politics and history of Amalfitano's dream of the end of communism in neoliberal accommodation, we can now return to and consider the morality of the scene that precedes it and is imbricated with it: his memory of the young pharmacist who doesn't dare to engage with the "great" works of the "masters." What I'm proposing as the novel's central questions about equality and hierarchy arise with this very encounter: Marco Antonio Guerra claims superiority to the modern world and allegiance with the singularly pure realm of poetry, which he embodies in the figure of Georg Trakl. Amalfitano, perhaps through nothing more than professional coincidence and love of literature, surmises that this young man could be another Trakl. At the same time, he's struck by the "triste paradoja" that "ya ni los farmacéuticos ilustrados se atreven con las grandes obras, imperfectas, torrenciales..." (280; emphasis mine). Amalfitano categorizes this near-complete stranger among those who should be most capable of meeting challenges that he represents as bloody, dangerous struggles for both writer and reader, but whose bravery has attenuated to the point where they stick to the "ejercicios perfectos de los grandes maestros" (ibid.). Purity, perfection, and safety are all afforded by the minor work, while one risks a bloody death fighting against an all-threatening something—"ese aquello que nos atemoriza a todos" (290)—by engaging major works by major writers.

What great works seem to do for Amalfitano is to concentrate the vast impersonal forces that destroy us and make them available for direct combat. Setting aside the question of the merits of this approach to reading, this is clearly what *2666* seeks to accomplish. But crucially, the novel doesn't just try to reduce the confrontation to a single confrontation. After all, short stories or poems are just as capable of this kind of miniaturization of the wide world into a microcosm, an aleph. In fact, they can likely do a better job of it than novels. Héctor Hoyos wrote *Beyond Bolaño* under the motto "The world does not quite fit into a book" (1); Bolaño's final writing project was an attempt to cram the world into a book in order to combat it because what oppresses us is world-wide and globally powerful.

Bolaño once published a newspaper column entitled "Todos los temas con Fresán," which is mostly taken up with a list of frequent topics of conversation between himself and his Argentinean novelist friend Rodrigo Fresán. The catalog is prefaced with the disclaimer that he "will try to list them without a hierarchical order" but it ends, like all of Bolaño's ostensibly random lists, with a bang: "27) Del fin del mundo. 28) Del cine de Kubrick, que yo, ante el desmedido entusiasmo de Fresán, empiezo a detestar. 29) De la guerra increíble entre el planeta de los seres-novela y el planeta de los entes-cuento. 30) De la posibilidad de que cuando la novela despierte de su sueño de hierro, el cuento siga allí" (*Entre paréntesis*, 204).<sup>7</sup> This newspaper sketch is straight out of *2666*: two expatriate South American writers discussing *los temas más peregrinos*—the most random of topics—in a casually allusive style that masks some serious concerns. The final two points taken together, do nothing less than articulate a gnomic theory of the relationship between the genres of novel and story. And it really is the relationship that's highlighted here, as we don't get a single clue as to what Bolaño and Fresán—both prolific in both genres, and both creators of novels-of-stories like *La literatura nazi* and *Mantra*—believe constitutes the essence of either form. Point 29 renders the two genres as not only literally ontologically separate, with distinct planetary provenances, but as belligerents in a space-operatic war. Point 30 re-figures their opposition through a complex double allusion to a

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<sup>7</sup> "27) The end of the world. 28) Kubrick's films, which Fresán loves so much that I'm beginning to hate them. 29) The incredible war between the planet of the novel-creatures and the planet of the story-beings. 30) The possibility that when the novel wakes from its iron dream, the story will still be there" (219, translation modified).

famously short Latin American short story and an infamous U.S. sci-fi/fantasy novel. The story is Augusto Monterroso's "El dinosaurio," which reads, in its entirety: "Cuando despertó, el dinosaurio todavía estaba allí."<sup>8</sup> The novel is *The Iron Dream* by Norman Spinrad, the conceit of which is that it's the work of a counterfactual Adolf Hitler who has immigrated to the U.S. and become a fantasy illustrator and writer.

Even though the use of Monterroso's dinosaur fable might seem to place Bolaño and Fresán's short, allegorical talking point-*cum*-story in prehistory, everything else about this conceit, from the space-operatic set-up to the subjunctive mood it's delivered in, suggests that the two friends are working through a possible future for the novel and the story. The scenario they imagine actually inverts the received wisdom about the relation of dominance between the two genres: the novel is the sleeping, presumably vulnerable protagonist, while the short story is the menacing dinosaur which remains after the former's *sueño*, a sleep and dream, sleep that's figured as fascistic through its identification with Spinrad's counterfactual Hitler novel. This same conjunction of fascism and genre theory was notably an issue for Bolaño when he expanded the final chapter of his "novel" *La literatura nazi en América* into the short novel *Estrella distante*. The prefatory note to the latter states that the story of Lieutenant Ramírez Hoffman is told "perhaps too schematically" in that last chapter and articulates the difference between the two books in the following terms:

*El último capítulo de La literatura nazi servía como contrapunto, acaso como anticlímax del grotesco literario que lo precedía, y Arturo [Bolaño's alter ego, who, along with the "increasingly alive" ghost of Pierre Menard, oversees this narrative expansion] deseaba una historia más larga, no espejo ni explosión de otras historias sino espejo y explosión en si misma. (11; italics in the original)<sup>9</sup>*

In a far more expansive mode, Bolaño defends *Los detectives salvajes*'s status as a novel against the suggestion, raised by the interviewer Dunia Gras Miravet in the context of his having spun off *Amuleto* from one of its chapters, that it could be read as a short story collection:

*Los detectives salvajes* no es un conjunto de historias: es una novela, y una novela con una estructura difícilísima y una unidad tremenda. Que de ahí salga una historia no tiene nada que ver. Una novela, como dice Stendhal, es un espejo a lo largo del camino, unas historias que pasan a lo largo de ese paseo por el sendero. *En busca del tiempo perdido* no es más que una sucesión de pequeñas historias. Sin embargo, *En busca del tiempo perdido* es una novela de una estructura de hierro. Todo cambio, en el momento en que tú pones un punto y aparte en una novela, de una u otra manera te enfrenta a una nueva historia. Es como el flujo y el reflujo del mar. Cada vez que hay un punto y aparte la historia tiene que coger un nuevo aliento. Tienen que aparecer otros personajes u otra nueva situación. Al menos un bar distinto. Eso ya hace que una historia sea una concatenación de pequeñas historias. Pero es que todo en la vida física es una concatenación. El cuerpo no es más que una acumulación de pequeñas historias, moléculas, átomos, que al juntarse están creando eso. Ahora, una cosa es un cuento y otra

<sup>8</sup> "When he woke up, the dinosaur was still there" (translation mine).

<sup>9</sup> "It was meant to counterbalance the preceding excursions into the literary grotesque, or perhaps to come as an anticlimax, and Arturo would have preferred a longer story that, rather than mirror or explode others, would be, in itself, a mirror and an explosion" (1).

cosa es una novela. Tiene unas reglas: en una novela, una historia que esté totalmente aparte, como en un cuerpo, o se convierte en un cáncer que tienes dentro o se convierte en algo que sale, como un hijo, pero en mi novela no sale nada, todo está absolutamente pegado. Hay enlaces, hay incluso autopistas que te llevan lejísimos, pero luego siempre hay un camino de vuelta. (*Bolaño por si mismo*, 55)<sup>10</sup>

In its assured skip from one figure to another, this long answer sounds quite a lot like one of the speeches heard by 2666's characters on their travels. It features two metaphors for a kind of variety or multiplicity tied together by a fundamental unity: the trip and the body. The first of these models is fundamentally diachronic: a novel is unlike a story in that it gains variety as you move along the road (in Stendhal's classic nineteenth-century image) or if you follow the network of roads (in Bolaño's more expansive turn-of-the-twenty-first-century update). It's also a metaphor that suggests that the novelist is allowing the world's stories to enter into his work at random. (A certain randomness, as I'll emphasize in Chapter Three, is essential to the novel's encyclopedic ambitions.)

The metaphor of the body is far more oriented towards synchrony—all of the story-cells make up the body at once—but Bolaño's figuration of its two unbearable exceptions as a cancer and an embryo adds a temporal dimension as well: the child is merely "something that comes out" and the cancer presumably kills "your" body if left untreated or unremoved. Rather than a civil engineer, the novelist is an obstetrician or oncologist called upon to intervene if the material of his work possesses too much of a life of its own.

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<sup>10</sup> "The *Savage Detectives* isn't a collection of stories, it's a novel with an extremely difficult structure and a tremendous unity. It doesn't matter at all if a story comes out of there. A novel, as Stendhal says, is a mirror carried down the road, it's the stories that pass by as you travel down the path. *In Search of Lost Time* is nothing more than a series of small stories. Nevertheless, *In Search of Lost Time* is a novel with an iron structure. Every change you make, every time that you put a final period to some part of a novel, one way or another, you're facing a new story. It's like the flow and ebb of the sea. Every time there's a break, the story needs to catch a new breath. New characters need to appear or a new situation needs to arise. You at least need a new bar. That already makes it so that a story is a concatenation of smaller stories. Everything in physical life is a concatenation. The body is nothing more than an accumulation of small stories, molecules, atoms, that when they get together, they make it up. Now, a short story is one thing and a novel is another. There are rules: in a novel, a story that's completely apart works like in a body: either it becomes a cancer you have inside of you or it becomes something that comes out, like a child. In my novel, nothing comes out, it's all glued together. There are links, there are even highways that take you very far, but there's always a way back." (translation mine)

Ursula K. Le Guin, a very different writer, writing in the very first number of *Science Fiction Studies* about Norman Spinrad's *The Iron Dream*, makes similar points about the novel and story forms:

[In his stories] what Spinrad is after is an idea, a moral idea; of the world of emotions and sensations, nothing exists but a vague atmosphere of charged violence, through which the reader is hurled forward breakneck towards the goal. To read a Spinrad short story is to be driven at top speed across the salt flats in a racing car. It's a powerful car and he's a great driver. He leaves the other racers way behind. But a novel isn't a racing car. It is much more like a camel caravan, an ocean, liner, or the Graf Zeppelin. It is by essence large, long, slow, intricate, messy, and liable to get where it is going by following a Great Circle. Variety of pace, variety of tone and mood, and above all complexity of subject, are absolutely essential to the novel. I don't think Spinrad has faced that yet. His three long books are over-extended short stories. And they have been relative failures, because you do not make a novel by just stretching out a story. (43)

Both figures imply that the novelist is fundamentally charged with paying attention to the world and hiving off a portion of it into a novel with a “tremendous unity.”<sup>11</sup> The novelist can do this because the work and the world are one: “una historia [es] una concatenación de pequeñas historias. Pero es que todo en la vida física es una concatenación. El cuerpo no es más que una acumulación de pequeñas historias, moléculas, átomos, que al juntarse están creando eso.” Bolaño’s ontology is monist and materialist. In a word, it’s Spinozist. Here are two passages from Warren Montag’s *Bodies, Masses, Power: Spinoza and his Contemporaries* that suggest some of the implications of this philosophical position:

For Spinoza the body, every body, is necessarily composite, composed of smaller bodies, themselves composed of other bodies ad infinitum. Far from exhibiting a stability of boundaries, bodies are subject to a constant recomposition (xxi).

...just as there is no downward limit to the beings that compose beings...so there is no upward limit. Thus, groups, collectivities, societies themselves comprise individuals, or singularities, that are no less real than human individuals. Even a couple, according to Spinoza, forms an individual that is as real as the two individuals of which it is composed: ‘if two individuals of completely the same nature are combined, they compose an individual twice as powerful as each one singly’ (*Ethics*, IV, Prop. 18, scholium). The conjunctural agreement of complex elements that defines the specific ‘character’ or complexion of an individual (Spinoza employs the Latin term *ingenium*) is found on a larger scale in the collective forms of human existence: couples, masses, nations all have a specific *ingenium* that makes them what they are and no other (Moreau, 1994, 527-65). (69).

For both Spinoza and Bolaño, then, both novels and collectivities are, at the deepest level, the same as stories and individuals: they’re all temporary co-incidences of smaller units. At the same time, scale does matter, and a large novel composed of many stories will undoubtedly have a different character from a “single” story or from one composed of only a few stories.

The Spinozist model also points towards one of the greatest sources of pathos in Bolaño’s fiction in general and in *2666* in particular. For Spinoza, individuals need each other in order to thrive and to flourish and thus, the solitary individuals who all coincide within the frame of the novel are deeply unfree insofar as they can’t live together. The novel’s many assemblages—the small group of critics that come together so briefly in the first part; those families: Amalfitano and his daughter, Archimboldi and his sister; those couples, from Oscar Fate and Rosa Amalfitano to Juan de Dios Vasquez and Elvira Campos—fail to hold together under the pressures of the violent world that surrounds them.

In fact, the single most common story in the novel, the modal cell out of which its body is comprised, is the encounter between two strangers who attempt to forge a bond and fail. This happens between the major characters who own each of the novel’s parts. The Critics, for example, are nonplussed by their fellow Archimboldian Amalfitano, in part because they’re so ignorant of Latin American history that they don’t understand why he would have left his native Chile in the seventies. It also happens time and again between these itinerant protagonists and

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Henry James in the Preface to the New York Edition of *Roderick Hudson*: “Really, universally, relations stop nowhere, and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally but to draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle within which they shall happily appear to do so.” (1039)

nearly everyone whom they encounter. Amalfitano's reverie about the great torrential works and the Yeltsin demon is, after all, the product of his failure to connect with Marco Antonio Guerra or with the enlightened young pharmacist.

The connection with these young men that Amalfitano hopes for, and that he laments is impossible, involves a real engagement with the great novels that he cherishes. As we've seen, he regards these novels as real struggles between the novelist and that unnamable *aquello*, the something that's out there and that "terrorizes us all." Young Guerra—who flaunts his preference for classical music and lyric poetry, forms of art that he considers "pure," and who cynically suggests that his *tocayo* Subcomandante Marcos ought to sacrifice his indigenous followers and move to Miami—is like the young pharmacist—an avid reader content with his stories and novellas—in that, despite his clear capacity, he doesn't care to face the world as it is. Amalfitano is not a Spinozist in any straightforward sense, but he does seem to believe that we are all subject to the same forces ("the laws of rules of Nature according to which all things happen and change from one form to another are everywhere and always the same" ("Preface" to Part III of the *Ethics*)) and that we can better grasp these forces by reading books that in their immodest ambitions succeed in capturing some substantial part of the world. And for all that the world is filled with horrors, he knows from experience that reading these books is enlivening rather than enervating.<sup>12</sup>

Is this kind of reading enough? It might constitute a meaningful engagement, even a struggle, with the multifarious world horrors, but can it do anything about them? No single moment in this novel about plurality can answer this, but I think that taken together, its many stories about far-flung individuals engaging each other and the world through books suggest that reading can at least be a part of the process towards the transformation that's needed. Literature can't merely be another form of the acquiescent "magic" that the Yeltsin demon is selling, the bribe that allows us to make our peace with the world as it is. To be sure, *2666* puts forth a kind of universal vision of the human condition—a vision I'm hoping to clarify by invoking Spinoza—but it's not the cynical vision of the demon's three-legged table in which capitalism is posited as eternal and everything outside of economic rationality serves as a mere escape valve. The novel's model readers do turn to reading for consolation—it's the experience that helps Barry Seaman get through prison and Hans Reiter through World War II and that transforms Florita Almada's isolated widowhood—but it also does more than that for each of them: it makes them want to change the world through deeds or words. The Black Panther and the seer will give speeches both practical and encyclopedic, digests of their omnivorous reading. The novelist will distill his adventures on the page and on the battlefield into books that are mysteries to us in almost all of their particulars but that we know from their effects: they captivate their readers and, despite their mid-twentieth-century European origins, they speak to the horrors of the turn-of-the-millennium Mexico-U.S. border.

In short, the necessarily singular acts of writing, speaking, and reading available to each of us as individuals are meaningful insofar as they can enable similar acts in others, acts that can enable these strangers to better understand our shared world. But, of course, *2666* is not just a compilation of instances of this kind of communication. Its successful exchanges are embedded within an exhausting account of the violence that makes such communication impossible for most people. This is why the novel's vindication of the meaning of literature is absolutely

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<sup>12</sup> A fundamental distinction for Spinoza, it essentially kicks off the part of the *Ethics* that deals with ethics: "Our mind is in some instances active and in other instances passive. In so far as it has adequate ideas, it is necessarily active; and in so far as it has inadequate ideas, it is necessarily passive" (Part III, Proposition 1).

dependent on both its great length and its variety of historical and geographical setting. David Kurnick gets at much of this in his explanation of why the final Archimboldi section's length and wealth of detail keeps it from being either "irrelevant" to the femicides of its central part "or, worse, a somewhat repugnant attempt to guarantee the gravity of the Mexican crimes by connecting them to the Big Meaning of the Holocaust":

it is precisely Bolaño's exhaustively realistic treatment of both of these sections that refuses to make either term the mirror of the other. The sheer referential weight of both the Mexican and the European sections of the novel corrodes any absolute status for the Nazi genocide—and this corrosion does nothing to claim these two spaces' equivalence: any such argument falters on the very proliferation of detail in both sections. Each location remains stubbornly and viscerally itself. Thus does Bolaño's text short-circuit allegorical thought with the density of its verisimilitude; more precisely, it retains the structure of allegory but refuses to tell us which side of the code takes precedence. (128)

This form of juxtaposition without hierarchy doesn't only hold for the different chronotopes that Kurnick analyzes (his essay is focused on Bolaño's relationship to globalization and geopolitics); it's absolutely essential to the novel at every level. Some characters retain the novel's focus for hundreds of pages, others appear for a fraction of a page,<sup>13</sup> but—and this is perhaps the central conclusion of my work—much of what the novel's stories and rhetorical set-pieces hope to get us to realize is that a fundamental equality is shared by everyone.

For all that it carries with the visceral horrors of our world, *2666* also tries to induce in us an experience of equality akin to the one Elias Canetti writes that we feel when we feel ourselves to be a part of a crowd. It is a novel that tries to capture an experience of the potential of the worldwide Spinozist multitude without assuming, like Hardt and Negri's *Empire* trilogy, that it is already rising up to challenge capitalism or Empire. Despite chronicling the tragedy of young lives cut short right now, it doesn't rule out the possibility of that uprising taking place, perhaps in its titular year.

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<sup>13</sup> For a good discussion of the moral questions raised by the vexed existence of "minor characters," see Alex Woloch's *The One vs. The Many*. One crucial difference between that study and mine is that his archive is weighted towards the nineteenth century realist novel in which the protagonist and the minor character who vies with him or her for room within the "character space" both share a specific society.

## Chapter 1: Insufferable Hierarchies

All meganovels have large casts of characters and all of them interlink and develop these casts in their own way. Lawrence Buell concludes *The Dream of the Great American Novel*, his recent survey of ambitious U.S. fiction, with an examination of “the resurgence of postrealist investment in maximalist conjuration of social textures and networks” in “late twentieth-century maximalist” novels like *Gravity’s Rainbow* and *Infinite Jest* (424). Like their forebear *Moby-Dick*, these novels are intent on “tracking heterogeneous cross-sections of characters, whether closely interacting or widely dispersed, conjoined by a common task, challenge, or threat that dramatizes democracy under siege or duress” as well as “[offering] thought experiments in imagining forms of possible and/or balked ‘democratic’ collectivity” (349). Jean Franco has noted a similar phenomenon at work in the Latin American context. She’s written about how the great Boom novels often include both large-scale representations of social or national wholes and smaller utopian experiments, “[societies] outside the system of exchange, hierarchy, and power which condemned Latin American countries to anachronism and to the status of dependency” (*Critical Passions*, 153). The small societies Franco identifies tend to be autocratic rather than democratic but I’m less interested in the precise nature of their political identity than in the fact that they represent attempts at thinking about political power and social organization within fiction. These novels are as long and complex as they are because they attempt to represent sociopolitical totalities and often even possible alternatives to these totalities.

Roberto Bolaño’s *2666* is as long and thickly populated as any of these novels, but it focuses on individuals and their personal narratives to the almost complete exclusion of collective life and experience. Which isn’t to say that it’s a psychological novel in the traditional sense. The Mexican novelist Juan Villoro, a friend of Bolaño’s, seeks to articulate the novel’s strangeness by differentiating it from Bolaño’s other long novel and by pinpointing its present-centered temporality:

En *Los detectives salvajes* un coro múltiple se narra a sí mismo a través de monólogos. El autor está al otro lado de un vidrio de espejo, registrando declaraciones. Apenas publicada, la novela se convirtió en objeto de culto, un *I-Ching* en el que se adivina hacia atrás, para descifrar lo ya sucedido, el *Libro de las Mutaciones* de una generación, una época pensada en primera persona, donde cada quien es detective de su destino. El procedimiento se altera en *2666*. Los personajes son trabajados como casos, sujetos ajenos a las vacilaciones de la vida interior que al modo de los héroes griegos avanzan a su desenlace sin cerrar los ojos. Los capítulos representan las carpetas de un investigador. Esta vez el detective está fuera del libro, narrándolo. Si los crímenes de Ciudad Juárez son descritos como un peritaje médico, los personajes integran un archivo de datos: tienen acciones, no conjeturas. El recuerdo o el anhelo importan poco al investigador; no puede extraviarse en las posibilidades del pasado o el futuro; debe enfocar el presente donde las huellas dactilares trazan una película confusa y sin embargo legible; no se pregunta por qué esos personajes hacen lo que hacen: reconstruye los hechos. La vida

diaria se abre como un misterio equivalente a las fosas comunes de Ciudad Juárez. De ahí la peculiar energía del libro y su tensión de avance. (87)<sup>1</sup>

Villoro is right that the forensic investigative model of narration that characterizes the novel's central section, "The Part About the Crimes," extends to the book as a whole, but he's wrong to claim that the only meaningful investigator works from outside the story-world. This may be true at the margins, at the beginning and end when some extra-diegetic detective seems to be tracking the critics and Archimboldi, but in the novel's vast middle we meet many detectives with their own cases and archives and plenty of conjectures about the whereabouts and destinies of others. Much of the novel's pathos, I'd argue, is due to the co-presence of the implacable, professional investigator-narrator whom Villoro describes so well with the flawed and flailing wild detectives who wrest control from that figure every so often to try to make sense of their own pasts and worry about their futures. Bolaño entitled an earlier novel that prefigured many of *2666*'s themes and characters *Los sinsabores del verdadero policía*. By the time he came around to writing his final book, he'd cleaved the woes from the true policeman and spread them among those searching characters who appear, one after another, over the course of the story. This chapter, indeed this dissertation, is focused on the points of contact between these seekers and how, at specific moments, they understand their relationship to each other and to people like and unlike them.

Which isn't to say that we as readers come to understand any one of them well at all. Near its end, *2666* remains fixed on the writer Benno von Archimboldi (né Hans Reiter) for hundreds of pages, but even after learning about much of his incident-packed life he remains a mystery to the reader (as does the Europe that he lives through). Archimboldi serves all over the continent as a German soldier during World War II and he comes of age as a writer in the postwar era, but the novel fails to chronicle a single momentous historical event. Archimboldi is a thoroughly apolitical loner interested only in surviving and, later on, only in writing, and while the name of every little village and city street that he alights in is dutifully recorded, no attempt is ever made to place his story in the larger context of the war or the reconstruction.<sup>2</sup> Put another way, there's nothing obviously historiographic about this sprawling metafiction: the hidden architects of the war and the postwar order are not revealed, as in *Gravity's Rainbow*, and no historical individuals are fictionally reconsidered, as in *Underworld*.<sup>3</sup> Like the parts of the novel

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<sup>1</sup> "In *The Savage Detectives* a multiple chorus narrates itself through monologues. The author is on the other side of a two-way mirror, taking testimonies. As soon as it was published, the novel became a cult object, an *I-Ching* one guesses through backwards to decipher what's already happened, a generation's *Book of Changes*, an age lived in the first person, where each is the detective of their own destiny. The approach changes in *2666*. The characters are worked like cases, subjects removed from the vacillations of interior life who, like Greek heroes, walk to their destinies open-eyed. The chapters represent an investigator's files. This time the detective is outside the book, narrating it. If the Juárez crimes are described like a medical report, the characters make up a database: they have actions rather than conjectures. The investigator cares little about memory and desire; he can't get lost in the possibilities of the past or the future; he needs to focus on the present, where fingerprints trace a confusing but legible layer; he doesn't ask himself why these characters do what they do: he reconstructs what happened. Daily life opens up like a mystery equivalent to the common graves of Juárez. That's where the book's particular energy and momentum come from." (translation mine)

<sup>2</sup> Military-historical facts are baldly stated—"The attack on the Soviet Union began on June 22, 1941. The 79<sup>th</sup> division was attached to the 11<sup>th</sup> German Army, and a few day's later the division's advance troops crossed the Prut" (700) and so forth—but the focus always narrows to Archimboldi almost instantaneously and combat is never represented, not even in an ironic, deflating Fabrice-haplessly-wandering-around-Waterloo way.

<sup>3</sup> For the concept of historiographic metafiction, see the work of Linda Hutcheon and Amy Elias.



that take place in the late twentieth century, “The Part About Archimboldi” is stitched together out of the many encounters that its protagonist has with other isolated individuals. And it is really these encounters that I would like to analyze in this chapter. One of the central theses that I want to advance about *2666* is that it’s a novel composed almost entirely of encounters. For all that it takes in massive historical events and chronicles entire lives, the main thing that happens in it is that one person meets another, whether face to face or on the page. When the novel isn’t reporting action, it’s transcribing various different attempts to communicate or to externalize thought: speeches, acts of automatic drawing and writing, letters, jottings in notebooks. These are the texts that will concern me here.

Another way of putting this is that this chapter is about the manner in which literature, broadly construed to include both published books and the occasional, private texts mentioned above, brings far-flung individuals together in *2666*. Articulating what the motley people whose stories are told in *2666* share is a crucial first step towards understanding a novel that, while centered on the city of Santa Teresa, extends far beyond its bounds, and that doesn’t limit itself to a single historical era like a dictatorship, war, or revolution or a literary category like *La literatura nazi en América*. Joaquín Manzi gets at this in his account of the role played in the novel by its other major center of gravity, Germany:

los acontecimientos centrales de la historia alemana reciente están ausentes—la ocupación, la división y reunificación—y quedan transfigurados a través de objetos simbólicos—una biblioteca perdida, una máquina de escribir alquilada, una primera computadora portátil. Alemania para Bolaño es un todo obsesivo y compacto. Alemania es también objeto de una *mimesis* mínima, superada pronto por una *dynamis*, una corriente fluvial que arrastra a personajes y narradores hacia lugares ignotos. (6)<sup>4</sup>

As Manzi’s summary suggests, inspecting the literary ties that bind many of the novel’s characters in fact allows us to begin to understand *2666*’s politics and ethics insofar as it raises key questions about how individuals relate not only to one another but also to different collectivities, including the one made up of the totality of the novel’s characters.

This study of specifically *literary* relation won’t produce an exhaustive mapping of the novel, however. The novel’s central section *is* centered on a place, the Juárez-like border city of Santa Teresa, and the imaginary collectivity that comes together there is composed of people deeply affected by a series of murders, rather than by any bookish affinity. In fact, one of the great sources of pathos for the reader who pursues the novel’s literary mysteries into “The Part About the Crimes” is how bereft of literary culture those several hundred pages are. Which isn’t to say that a focus on literature simply cedes to one on violence: both are present throughout *2666* and their imbrication is a primary concern of both this chapter and of this dissertation as a whole. In my next chapter, I will focus on that middle and on the way that it is suffused by gendered violence, by violence against women; for now, I want to look at how literature mediates the experiences of a number of the men in *2666*, their experiences of each other and of the chaotic world they inhabit. A similar method, inspired by the novel itself, marks this and the following two chapters. I closely read an encounter in all of its particularity while also seeking to

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<sup>4</sup> “The major events of recent German history are absent—the Occupation, Division, and Reunification—and get instead transfigured into symbolic objects—a lost library, a rented typewriter, a first portable computer. Germany is an obsessive and compact whole for Bolaño; it’s also the object of a minimal *mimesis*, quickly overcome by a *dynamis*, a current that drags characters and narrators to unknown places” (translation mine).

place it in the context of the novel's overall scheme. For instance, when I unpack the episode of the borrowed typewriter, I tease apart the interpersonal dynamics between the young Archimboldi and the former writer but also consider them as Germans, as writers, and as characters within the novel's globe-spanning frame. *Pace* Villoro, the old man has intense memories, desires, and an elaborate, if deeply ambiguous, conjecture about the fates of people like himself.

I want to begin with this scene and another much like it because they play out like condensed versions of *2666* as a whole. They both dramatize the plight of the isolated individual and suggest how important individual connection becomes in a world bereft of any sense of collective belonging. They also both show how, quite counter-intuitively, the fear of being a nobody lost in a multitude haunts so many of the novel's loners. Finally, and most importantly, these scenes convey how the novel persistently stages the failed face-to-face encounter and how, in its world, solidarity is more often than not found only on the page, by candlelight.

### **Forest, Camouflage, Cannon Fodder**

The first of these episodes occurs late in the novel, in the Archimboldi section, at the precise moment in which Hans Reiter assumes the name Benno von Archimboldi. Reiter has just completed his first novel and is in need of a typewriter. He wants to publish the novel but doesn't want its authorship to be traced back to him so he wanders the backstreets of Cologne looking for a stranger from whom to borrow the machine. He finds an old man who prides himself on only renting out his machine to writers and who, though skeptical that this young German could bear the preposterous name Benno von Archimboldi (which Reiter has come up with on the spot), agrees to the rental. Before handing over the machine, however, he subjects Archimboldi to one of *2666*'s oratorical set pieces: a splenetic, anfractuoso harangue that takes up a good nine pages of the novel. These are some of its key moments:

La literatura es un vasto bosque y las obras maestras son los lagos, los árboles inmensos o extrañísimos, las elocuentes flores preciosas o las escondidas grutas, pero un bosque también está compuesto por árboles comunes y corrientes, por yerbazales, por charcos, por plantas parásitas, por hongos y por florecillas silvestres. Me equivocaba. Las obras menores, en realidad, no existen. Quiero decir: el autor de una obra menor no se llama fulanito o zutanito. Fulanito o zutanito existen, de eso no cabe duda, y sufren y trabajan y publican en periódicos y revistas y de vez en cuando publican un libro que no desmerece el papel en el que está impreso, pero esos libros o esos artículos, si usted se fija con atención, *no están escritos por ellos*.

Toda obra menor tiene un autor secreto y todo autor secreto es, por definición, un escritor de obras maestras...

[El escritor menor] escribe al dictado. Su novela o poemario, decentes, decentitos, salen no por un ejercicio de estilo o voluntad, como el pobre desgraciado cree, sino gracias a un ejercicio de *ocultamiento*. ¡Es necesario que haya muchos libros, muchos pinos encantadores, para que velen de miradas aviesas el libro que realmente importa, la jodida gruta de nuestra desgracia, la flor mágica del invierno!

Disculpe las metáforas. A veces me excito y me pongo romántico. Pero escuche. Toda obra que no es una obra maestra es, cómo se lo diría, una pieza de un vasto camuflaje. Usted ha sido soldado, me imagino, y ya sabe a lo que me refiero. Todo libro que no sea una obra maestra es carne de cañón, esforzada infantería, pieza sacrificable dado que

reproduce, de múltiples maneras, el esquema de la obra maestra. Cuando comprendí esta verdad dejé de escribir. Mi mente, sin embargo, no dejó de funcionar. Al contrario, al no escribir funcionaba mejor. Me pregunté: ¿por qué una obra maestra necesita estar oculta? ¿qué extrañas fuerzas la arrastran hacia el secreto y el misterio? (982-4; emphasis in the original)<sup>5</sup>

The old man not only judges literary works as either priceless masterpieces or worthless copies; he judges individuals by this absolute, two-tiered standard as well. There are the happy few heroic writers and the great undifferentiated mass, whose sole reason for existing is to conceal and protect the secret elite. This is a chilling way of looking at the world but it's not an uncomplicatedly self-serving one: time and again the old man identifies himself as one of the expendable many.

It's certainly possible to admire the speech as a trenchant exercise in social criticism. Sharae Deckard, for one, reads it as one of the novel's "didactic set pieces," one of the moments in which Bolaño is sharing his own views through one of his characters. She describes the speech as a "contemplation of literary artifacts as documents of barbarism [that] is suffused with Benjaminian horror" (361). For her it is first and foremost a coded attack on the "market dynamics of the world-literary field" (362). It's true that at one point the old man does take a moment to excoriate certain institutions—literary academies, universities, corporations, patrons of the arts—but he characterizes them as mere ancillaries that tend to the forest of literature and help it to grow. He has the odd sympathetic word for minor writers, but by and large he holds them in contempt and claims that they are complicit in "the charade that will probably carry us to the abyss" (985).

Deckard's sympathetic assessment of the rant does point up its essential ambiguity and ambivalence. In moments like the one just cited, it feels like the old man is denouncing a grand conspiracy to fill the world with irredeemable trash. At others, he seems to prize the contribution of all the unwitting mediocrities whose productivity allows great work and great writers to remain hidden, as he clearly believes they must. Conceptual incoherence aside, the old man's metaphors for the literary world also read as apt figures for *2666* itself. The experience of reading the novel could, after all, be compared to a wander in the forest of literature: both are

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<sup>5</sup> "Literature is a vast forest and the masterpieces are the lakes, the towering trees or strange trees, the lovely, eloquent flowers, the hidden caves, but a forest is also made up of ordinary trees, patches of grass, puddles, clinging vines, mushrooms, and little wildflowers. I was wrong. There's actually no such thing as a minor work. I mean, the author of the minor work isn't Mr. X or Mr. Y. Mr. X and Mr. Y do exist, there's no question about that, and they struggle and toil and publish in newspapers and magazines and sometimes they even come out with a book that isn't unworthy of the paper it's printed on, but those books or articles, if you pay close attention, *are not written by them*. Every minor work has a secret author and every secret author is, by definition, a writer of masterpieces... [The minor writer] writes like someone taking dictation. His novel or book of poems, decent, adequate, arises not from an exercise of style or will, as the unfortunate believes, but as the result of an exercise of *concealment*. There must be many books, many lovely pines, to shield from hungry eyes the book that really matters, the wretched cave of our misfortune, the magic flower of winter! Excuse the metaphors. Sometimes, in my excitement, I wax romantic. But listen. Every work that isn't a masterpiece is, in a sense, a part of a vast camouflage. You've been a soldier, I imagine, and you know what I mean. Every book that isn't a masterpiece is cannon fodder, a slogging foot soldier, a piece to be sacrificed, since in multiple ways it mimics the design of the masterpiece. When I came to this realization I gave up writing. Still, my mind didn't stop working. In fact, it worked better when I wasn't writing, I asked myself: why does a masterpiece need to be hidden? What strange forces wreath it in secrecy and mystery?" (785-6)

filled with countless specimens, many tedious, some extraordinary or even horrific. With its associations of vastness and mystery and punctuated tedium, the forest of literature bears a formal similarity to the novel's epigraph, a verse adapted from Baudelaire: "An oasis of horror in a desert of boredom." Forest and desert: the two landscapes couldn't be less alike but they both suggest the importance that the search for or discovery of exceptionality bears for the novel, not only at the level of the entire book but also in many of the individual plots out of which it's constructed. To name the most extensive ones: the first section of the book is structured around a search for the reclusive Archimboldi by a group of European academics who have decided that he is the great hidden master of world literature, and much of the action in sections three and four revolves around the perception that the many murders of women in Santa Teresa must be the work of some stealthy mastermind. I don't mean to suggest that these various stories and images aren't different in many significant ways, but the old man's image of the forest of literature nicely captures the importance of the exceptional, mysterious individual for the novel.

The forest figure also naturalizes and renders ontological the difference between the ordinary, minor writer, and the great writer whom he unwittingly serves.<sup>6</sup> The former writer actually prefaces his rant with a politico-historical thesis: Germany's crimes in the recent war were due to its devotion to purity and the will, *la pureza y la voluntad* (981). Having abjured Nazism, he then laments his father's sentimental naiveté and his own failure to understand during his own abortive writing career that he ineluctably belongs among those whose only purpose is to be among the many who form the drab frame that sets off the brilliance of the happy few. With an irony as thick as the forest he describes, he devotes most of his speech to articulating his deeply held belief that the few master writers are purely better than their pathetic peers who are hopelessly deluded in their belief that they belong to the same caste. For him, there is no mixture between minor and major writers. At the same time, he doesn't propose that the two castes arise in unconnected parallel, he specifies that the works of the minor writers are all ultimately the work of the major writers (983). Through something like an inversion of Marx's account of the class relation, the self-loathing former writer holds that all literary value is produced by the great and powerful and that it is the ordinary literary worker who is parasitic upon his boss.

But just when he seems to have wrenched writers out of history and placed them in this fantastic wood where the great eternally produce the ordinary, the former writer begins to add "we's" to his "they's" and begins to identify as a writer again (984). Vacillating between the first and third persons, he speaks about the desire for fame and immortality shared by all minor writers and indicates that all is not settled for them: "El juego y la equivocación son la venda y son el impulso de los escritores menores. También: son la promesa de su felicidad futura" (985).<sup>7</sup> In short, there's something beautiful<sup>8</sup> about these losers and there may be some hope for them yet. This is the moment in which he attacks institutions like academies and universities for helping the forest of literature grow unimpeded. He then wraps up this phase of his speech by noting that minor works might be acts of plagiarism but that the plagiarism is "*consentido*" (italics in the original), the minor writers consenting to participate. And moving paratactically on from that "plagio," he brings his metaphors together: "Un plagio que es un camuflaje que es una pieza en un escenario abigarrado que es una charada que probablemente nos conduzca al vacío"

<sup>6</sup> The rant is unequivocal about this typical writer's gender identity and even his marital status: smack in the middle of it there's a small vignette about how his wife watches him but fails to understand how empty he is (983).

<sup>7</sup> "Play and delusion are the blindfold and spur of minor writers. Also: the promise of their future happiness" (787).

<sup>8</sup> Stendhal in *De l'Amour*: "La beauté n'est que la promesse du bonheur."

(ibid.).<sup>9</sup> The idea that the forest of literature represented a natural hierarchy is turned on its head. The hard division of major and minor is now rejected as artificial and catastrophic.

This man's judgments change depending on whether he sees himself as a former writer for whom the ultimate reality is one of deep immutable hierarchy or a currently striving writer who sees the grand division between great and small as the mystification itself. What he ultimately undermines is the presumption that one can find a position from which to pass absolute judgment on the worth of people or their works. Hence the claim he makes next: "En una palabra: lo mejor es la experiencia. No le diré que la experiencia no se obtenga en el trato constante con una biblioteca, pero por encima de la biblioteca prevalece la experiencia. La experiencia es la madre de la ciencia, se suele decir" (985).<sup>10</sup> True knowledge, he seems to be suggesting, will come from going out into the world and meeting people, not from an established trove of books, important as those may be.

He doesn't expand on this precept any further; instead, he launches into a story which will conclude his speech, an anecdote about an encounter with a great writer that transforms into a story of uncanny doubling in the style of Edgar Allan Poe.<sup>11</sup> In brief: when he was young, the old man attended a series of lectures by a great German writer and became transfixed by his face and, in particular, by his eyes, "which seemed at times like two endless tunnels, two abandoned tunnels on the verge of collapse" (788). Years later, while visiting a hospital morgue out of morbid curiosity, he sees the very same eyes on a morgue attendant, takes the attendant's casual remark that he "doesn't have much time" as a deep truth about mortality and the human condition, and is left in a state of equivocal exaltation. It's fiendishly difficult to pin down what the old man is trying to convey to Archimboldi through this baffling story, but it employs a set of tropes that run throughout the larger novel: doubling and the possibility of a deep affinity between unlikely individuals; the notion that a real writer is capable of facing death unflinchingly (Archimboldi, who both witnesses and perpetrates violence during the war, is the chief example of this); the idea that those who confront death possess a special wisdom.

The story also reads like an illustration of the old man's inability to give up on the idea that there is an ontological difference between a high priest of culture like the writer he so admires and a lowly morgue attendant. He feels *un sobrecogimiento de horror*, "overwhelmed by horror," when he finds himself addressing the latter as if he were the former (988). At this moment, the speaker's categorical insistence that treating one of the high as if he were one of the low is contemptible feels downright Nietzschean.<sup>12</sup> He'd begun this anecdote in order to illustrate his belief that more-than-bookish experience confirms the intuition that the dichotomy of writers, and people, is a sham. By the time he reaches its end, having experienced the uncanny

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<sup>9</sup> "Plagiarism as camouflage as some wood and canvas scenery as a charade that leads us, likely as not, into the void" (787).

<sup>10</sup> "In a word: experience is best. I won't say you can't get experience by hanging around libraries, but libraries are second to experience. Experience is the mother of science, it is often said" (787).

<sup>11</sup> The following are two of the twelve numbered pieces of advice to people who want to write short stories that Bolaño published in the Catalan magazine *Quimera*: "9) The honest truth is that if we read Edgar Allan Poe that is more than enough. 10) Consider the ninth point. Consider and reflect. It's not too late. You must consider point number nine. If possible: on your knees" (*Entre paréntesis*, 351). This can serve us as a reminder that Bolaño was as prone to literary cult-worship as any of his characters.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. the third essay of *On the Genealogy of Morality*: "the higher *ought* not to abase itself as the tool of the lower, the pathos of distance *ought* to ensure that their tasks are kept separate for all eternity! Their right to be there, the priority of the bell with the clear ring over the discordant and cracked one, is clearly a thousand times greater: they alone are *guarantors* of the future, they alone have a *bounden duty* to man's future." (97)

terror of confusing a dead writer and live morgue worker, he seems to have recommitted to that division. Any hope that he would choose one stance or another is withdrawn by his parabolic envoi to Archimboldi: “Jesús es la obra maestra. Los ladrones son las obras menores. ¿Por qué están allí? No para realzar la crucifixión, como algunas almas cándidas creen, sino para ocultarla” (989).<sup>13</sup> What is he suggesting that the dark forces responsible for the stagecraft of the crucifixion are trying to hide? Jesus’ godhood and fundamental distance from ordinary humans? Or the truth of the universal equality among all people that he preached and sacrificed himself for? Bolaño very seldom reaches for religious language or imagery but here he feels compelled to make clear the metaphysical stakes of this one-time writer’s ambivalence.

The idea that is unambiguously expressed by this old writer, more clearly than anywhere else in *2666*, is the possibility that the phenomenal world involves a concerted mystification of a deep reality about the value and agency of the people in it. Much like the novel he’s a part of, however, he can’t make up his mind about whether he thinks this is (a) true or (b) a good thing. At certain points his conspiracy theorizing suggests that the sham is what he tells Archimboldi is the common sense among all practicing writers, i.e., that only the great originals matter. At others, he takes the Nietzschean position that modern ideology is in place precisely to keep us from grasping the deep inequality that separates the great from the small. The political values of freedom and equality are entwined in this latter vision, as the old man posits an inequality so absolute that the little people are nothing but unwitting tools of their betters.

For all that I’ve attempted to articulate the ideas advanced by the old man in his speech, I don’t want to be seen as extracting a conceptual kernel and sloughing off a narrative shell. The turn to equivocal anecdote is as characteristic of *2666*’s rhetorical set-pieces as the desperate tone. Rather than tarrying with ideas or expounding upon them until they become clear, Bolaño is always liable to introduce a story or state a brute fact. Tone, mood, and mystery are more important to him than conceptual clarity.

And therein lies the challenge and power of *2666* as a representation of a globalized world. Rather than staging moments in which characters reflect on the interconnectedness of it all, of how their own lives might intersect with those of others and how they might be complicit in relations of exploitation, Bolaño just piles up one story or incident after another. Most of the novel takes place in a city whose industry is dependent on maquiladoras but there are no moments of what Bruce Robbins calls the “sweatshop sublime,” in which the narrator (and the novel does have an extra-diegetic third-person reader) helps the reader think through a political injustice.

I’ll return to these questions when considering “The Part About the Crimes,” but for now I just want to underline that the old man’s speech is as close to a sustained disquisition on exploitation as the novel comes and that it is a highly ambiguous one that eventually dissolves into a personal narrative with a thoroughly ambiguous ending. To borrow the words, and much of the spirit, of a famous line of Margaret Thatcher’s: there is no such thing as society in *2666*, there are only individuals; many of them worthless, some truly great.

### **Amalfitano and the Minor Philosophers**

The old man’s rant in Cologne is a site of conspicuous anonymity in *2666*. The episode of Amalfitano’s diagrams, which I now turn to, also encapsulates the novel’s preference for the

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<sup>13</sup> “Jesus is the masterpiece. The thieves are minor works. Why are they there? Not to frame the crucifixion, as some innocent souls believe, but to hide it” (790).

personal over the abstract and for the mysterious over the explicit, while appraising the relationship of major to minor not through metaphor but through the proliferation of proper names. Óscar Amalfitano is the exiled Chilean philosophy professor whose mental unraveling upon his arrival in Santa Teresa is the subject of the second and shortest section of the novel. He occupies a kind of narrative middle ground between the young, wandering seekers like the young Archimboldi who drive the narrative forward and the old ranters like the former writer in Cologne who erupt into the novel to educate the wanderers, usually by proffering baffling advice. In fact, he first appears as an example of the latter, thoroughly confusing the Archimboldians who have traveled to Mexico in search of their literary hero, but he then becomes a wizened version of the former when his part of the novel picks up after theirs.

Near the middle of his section, while teaching his classes at the University of Santa Teresa, he finds himself sketching a series of geometric shapes and labeling each of their vertices “as dictated by chance or lethargy or the immense boredom that the students and the classes and the heat that settled over the city in those days inspired in him” (247). As with the visual puzzles found near the end of *Los detectives salvajes*, Bolaño reproduces these diagrams as a kind of puzzle or challenge for his readers. And here, as there, he allows his characters, Amalfitano in this case, to give a partial interpretation of the images.

And it’s these interpretations, rather than the diagrams themselves, that showcase the novel’s interest in major and minor, memorialized and forgotten. Amalfitano sees nothing amiss with the first drawing, a triangle with Plato, Aristotle and Heraclitus at its vertices, but the names added in drawing 2 “struck him as demented,” and not equally so:

Jenócrates podía estar allí, no carecía de cierta lógica peregrina, y también Protágoras, ¿pero que pintaban Tomás Moro y Saint-Simon? ¿qué pintaba, cómo se sostenía allí Diderot y, Dios de los cielos, el jesuita portugués Pedro da Fonseca, que fue uno más de los miles de comentaristas que ha tenido Aristóteles, pero que ni con fórceps dejaba de ser un pensador muy menor?<sup>14</sup> (248)

Whatever philosophical sense might bring these thinkers together is left to the side. What scandalizes Amalfitano is *qué pintan*—the sad figure that these modern, less august names strike when set next to the founders of Western philosophy, with Pedro da Fonseca a particular blight, a specimen of less-than-human scale.

By contrast, the third and final drawing of this group—a triangle and a rectangle set with names like Saint Anselm, Kant, and Leibniz at its vertices—makes immediate sense to Amalfitano: “Tenía cierta lógica, una lógica de adolescente tarado, de adolescente vagabundo en el desierto, con las ropas deshilachadas, pero con ropas. Todos los nombres, se podría decir, pertenecían a filósofos preocupados por el argumento ontológico”<sup>15</sup> (248). Even when the philosophical concept is as abstract as it is here—and the ontological argument, an attempt to prove the existence of God through pure ratiocination, is as abstract as can be—Amalfitano (and,

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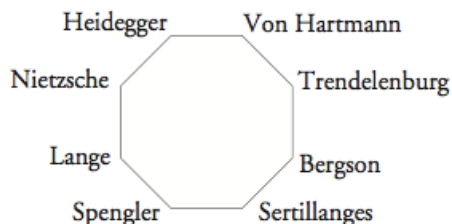
<sup>14</sup> “Xenocrates made sense, there was a fleeting logic there, and Protagoras too, but why Thomas More and Saint-Simon? Why Diderot, what was he doing there, and God in heaven, why the Portuguese Jesuit Pedro da Fonseca, one of the thousands of commentators on Aristotle, who by no amount of forceps wiggling could be taken for anything but a very minor thinker?” (192)

<sup>15</sup> “There was a certain logic to Drawing 3, the logic of a teenage moron, or a teen bum in the desert, his clothes in tatters, but clothes even so. All the names, it could be said, were the names of philosophers who concerned themselves with the ontological argument” (193, translation modified)

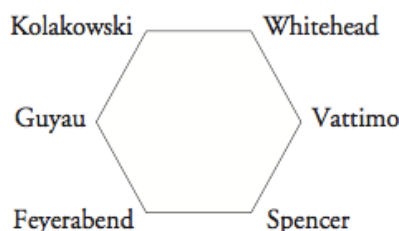
by extension, Bolaño) grounds it in a corporeal image. And, given Amalfitano's fraying self-respect, it's telling that the young, ragged idiot conjured up by this diagram is a survivor, that he retains his clothes and some of his dignity by trying to think high thoughts in the desert.

That night, presumably while watching the news and listening to his colleague Silvia Pérez complain to him about how the Santa Teresa police are handling the murders of women, Amalfitano produces three more automatic drawings. What interests Amalfitano is once again that in these non-hierarchical arrangements (an octagon and a hexagon) famous names are thrust together with obscure ones:

dibujo 4



dibujo 5



El dibujo 4 resultaba curioso. Trendelenburg, hacía muchos años que no pensaba en él. Adolf Trendelenburg. ¿Por qué justo ahora y por qué en compañía de Bergson y Heidegger y Nietzsche y Spengler? El dibujo 5 le pareció aún más curioso. La aparición de Kolakowski y Vattimo. La presencia del olvidado Whitehead. Pero sobre todo la asistencia imprevista del pobre Guyau. Jean-Marie Guyau, muerto a los treintaicuatro años, en 1888, a quien algunos bromistas llamaron el Nietzsche francés, y cuyos seguidores en el ancho mundo no pasaban de diez personas, aunque en realidad no eran más de seis, y eso Amalfitano lo sabía porque en Barcelona había conocido al único guyotista español, un profesor de Gerona tímido y a su manera entusiasta, cuyo mayor empeño era descubrir un texto (que no se sabía muy bien si era un poema o un ensayo filosófico o un artículo) que Guyau había escrito en inglés y publicado allá por el 1886-1887 en un periódico de San Francisco, California.<sup>16</sup> (249)

Amalfitano's drawings are, in a way, a reversal of the old German's image of the forest of literature: there many minor writers hide the great hidden master; here it is the small, nearly-forgotten thinker who stands out among the big names and who dominates Amalfitano's attention.

By choosing to have the diagrams printed rather than just describing them, Bolaño presumably wants to elicit a similar response in his readers, to have them ask who Guyau is to appear side by side with his more famous fellow thinkers. And having thus piqued his readers'

<sup>16</sup> "Drawing 4 was odd. Trendelenburg—it had been years since he'd thought about Trendelenburg. Adolf Trendelenburg. Why now, precisely, and why in the company of Bergson and Heidegger and Nietzsche and Spengler? Drawing 5 was even odder. The appearance of Kolakowski and Vattimo. The presence of forgotten Whitehead. But especially the unexpected materialization of poor Guyau, Jean-Marie Guyau, dead at thirty-four in 1888, called the French Nietzsche by some jokers, with no more than ten disciples in the whole world, although really there were only six, and Amalfitano knew this because in Barcelona he had met the only Spanish Guyautist, a professor from Gerona, shy and enthusiastic in his own way, whose great quest was to find a text (it might have been a poem or a philosophical piece or an article, he wasn't sure) that Guyau had written in English and published in a San Francisco newspaper sometime around 1886-1887." (194, translation modified)



interest, he then provides a short biographical sketch of the kind that appears so many times throughout the length of *2666*. Aside from the vague mention that he was derided as “the French Nietzsche” (another resonance with the old man’s speech: he was perceived as the minor copy of the major thinker), Guyau’s ideas don’t really receive any attention; what Amalfitano recalls is the pathos of his early death and of his vanishing legacy, which he’s only aware of because of a random personal connection.

These drawings invite exegesis from the reader. They ask one to make something of the fact that this second set of drawings, produced while Amalfitano took in the latest details about the violence in Santa Teresa, features a selection of post-ontological philosophers, several of whom are famous for their uncompromising critiques of modern civilization. Neither Amalfitano, nor the novel, is interested in such systematic thought, however. Later that night, after taking in even more news, he steps out onto his lawn and, prompted by the uncanny desert air—that “oneiric wind” (434) that obsesses Amalfitano (and so many others in Santa Teresa)—he calls upon his group of nearly forgotten philosophers:

Amalfitano sentía la brisa en su cara. Estaba sudando y las ráfagas irregulares de aire le secaban las gotitas de transpiración y ocluían su alma. Como si estuviera en el estudio de Trendelenburg, pensó, como si siguiera los pasos de Whitehead por la orilla de un canal, como si me acercara al lecho de enfermo de Guyau y le pidiera consejo. ¿Cuál hubiera sido su respuesta? Sea feliz. Viva el momento. Sea bueno. O por el contrario: ¿Quién es usted? ¿Qué hace aquí? Váyase.<sup>17</sup> (250)

However briefly, these men are brought into *2666*. We’ll never know exactly what it is about their lives or their writings that spoke to Amalfitano (or to Bolaño), but spurred by that soul-asphyxiating Santa Teresa air he remembers them as (still) living, breathing men and, in the case of Guyau, fantasizes about meeting him and approaching him for advice. Whether Guyau would recognize any similar affinity is left undecided, but the desire has at least been given voice.

This lack of explanation or motivation for the inclusion of the likes of Trendelenburg and Guyau is representative of how *2666* is put together. In fact, I’d like to propose that the high degree of vagueness or ambiguity in the naming of affinities spotlighted in the episode of Amalfitano’s drawings is part of what sets the novel apart, not only from other large contemporary novels but also from the rest of Bolaño’s work. Bolaño was an assiduous collector of writers from relatively early in his career as a fiction writer. For all the geographic and generic diversity that they exhibit, the fictional writers gathered in his early novel *La literatura nazi en América*<sup>18</sup> are all unified by their hard-right ideals. By contrast, *Los detectives salvajes* can be read as a compendium of avant-gardists. In one touching moment about halfway through that long novel, the old radical Amadeo Salvatierra reads an exhaustive “Directorio de Vanguardia” to the young poet-detectives Arturo Belano and Ulises Lima. Salvatierra introduces the

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<sup>17</sup> “Amalfitano felt the breeze on his face. He was sweating and the irregular gusts of air dried the little drops of perspiration and occluded his soul. As if I were in Trendelenburg’s study, he thought, as if I were following in Whitehead’s footsteps along the edge of a canal, as if I were approaching Guyau’s sickbed and asking him for advice. What would his response have been? Be happy. Live in the moment. Be good. Or rather: Who are you? What are you doing here? Go away.” (195)

<sup>18</sup> Yes, novel: Bolaño held that this text ought to be read as if it were a novel, and given the way that its final “chapter,” “Ramírez Hoffman, el infame” sets off everything that comes before it, I’m inclined to agree that it is more a unified, carefully shaped narrative than a loose collection to be browsed. See the prefatory note to *Distant Star*.

“Directorio” as having a lasting shock value—“en su tiempo (y después, cómo no, después también) tanto sorprendió a propios y extraños, a creadores y estudiosos del tema” (218)<sup>19</sup>—and like any list that aims for exhaustiveness it’s undoubtedly controversial, but all the recognizable names are modern artists or activists of some radical stripe or another. By the time Salvatierra finishes reading (and waspishly editorializing about) a list that is, by my count, 226 names long, his young interviewees are ready to toast these dead<sup>20</sup> and to give them a formal military salute (Bolaño never misses a chance to remind his readers of the term “avant-garde”’s military origin). Salvatierra, who dedicates a substantial portion of his sections of *Detectives* to complaining about Belano and Lima’s presumption and ignorance, nevertheless joins the young men and drinks to *todos nuestros muertos*, “all of our dead” (220). Whatever their disagreements, these representatives of very different generations are united in their desire to affirm the common cause of worldwide aesthetic revolution. The *Directorio* is legible because it was the product of a deliberate collective effort to assemble a literary republic on the page. Amalfitano’s drawings, by contrast, are hermetic because they’re the spontaneous effusions of a solitary man being driven mad by his surroundings.

Unlike the savage detectives, indeed, unlike Archiboldi himself, Archiboldi’s critics, or that other Oscar, Fate, Amalfitano has no real audience for the outpourings of his mind. In fact, even the most sensitive individuals who surround him fail to understand his ideas, despite their best efforts: first Liz Norton—with Morini, one of the two critics depicted as being reliably receptive to the thoughts and suffering of others—finds herself incapable of understanding any of his rambling, allegorical speech about the role of the intellectual in Mexican society and later his daughter Rosa asks him to please not hang up the *Testamento geométrico* on their clothesline because the neighbors think that he’s crazy (164, 251). In both cases, Amalfitano dismisses his performances as “tonterías,” as mere silliness, but it’s also clear from the effort and thought that he expends in these attempts to communicate that he truly does care and that he’s simply incapable of conveying what he means another way. At one point in his section he describes himself as possessing not conventional ideas but rather something else: “No las tenía siempre, por lo que tal vez sería excesivo llamarlas ideas. Eran sensaciones. Ideas-juego. Como si se aproximara a una ventana y se forzara a ver un paisaje extraterrestre”<sup>21</sup> (243). These words apply specifically to his thought-feelings about jet-lag but I propose that they apply more generally to almost everything he tries to convey, to his attempts to get across his defamiliarized, alienated perceptions of the world.

The final piece of automatic writing that Amalfitano produces abandons any obvious geometric organization but preserves the theme of the individual philosopher’s place among his peers throughout the ages. He creates it one night when he’s trying to prepare one of his classes but when he realizes that there’s no point in preparing a lesson that he knows “hasta la saciedad,” to his heart’s content. This time, Amalfitano is quite conscious of his desire to produce one of those “primary” geometric figures he’s made before. Here are his method, the quasi-diagram that he produces, and his reading of it:

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<sup>19</sup> “in its time (and afterward, certainly, and after that too) came as a surprise to insiders and outsiders, creators and scholars.” (225)

<sup>20</sup> Their drink of choice is mezcal Los Suicidas, a brand fetishized in both *Detectives* and *2666*, in the latter by Amalfitano’s stalker/aspiring protégé Marco Antonio Guerra.

<sup>21</sup> “They weren’t consistent, so it might be an exaggeration to call them ideas. They were feelings. Play-ideas. As if he were looking out the window and forcing himself to see an extraterrestrial landscape.” (188-9, translation modified)

Dibujó un rostro que luego borró y luego se ensimismó en el recuerdo de aquel rostro despedazado. Recordó (pero como de pasada, como se recuerda un rayo) a Raimundo Lulio y su máquina prodigiosa. Prodigiosa por inútil. Cuando volvió a mirar el papel en blanco había escrito, en tres hileras verticales, los siguientes nombres:

Pico della Mirandola	Hobbes	Boecio
Husserl	Locke	Alejandro de Hales
Eugen Fink	Erich Becher	Marx
Merleau-Ponty	Wittgenstein	Lichtenberg
Beda el Venerable	Lulio	Sade
San Buenaventura	Hegel	Condorcet
Juan Filópono	Pascal	Fourier
San Agustín	Canetti	Lacan
Schopenhauer	Freud	Lessing

Durante un rato, Amalfitano leyó y releyó los nombres, en horizontal y vertical, desde el centro hasta los lados, desde abajo hacia arriba, saltados y al azar, y luego se rió y pensó que todo aquello era un truismo, es decir una proposición demasiado evidente y por lo tanto inútil de ser formulada. (265-6)<sup>22</sup>

What could the laughably obvious truth contained in these lists of names be? Bolaño actually gives us a clue by listing the different ways that Amalfitano read them in order to arrive at his eureka moment. The most telling of these is a reading from the center out, since it makes the diagram revolve around the medieval Majorcan philosopher Lull, the fleeting memory of whom has generated the entire arrangement and whose “machine” (memorialized by both Borges and J. Rodolfo Wilcock) is precisely a visual way of sorting out all the combinations of a logical proposition in order to map out a complete truth. Of course, what we have here are proper names rather than propositions, the proper names of a great many famous philosophers, whose works are not easily reducible to particular ideas. This suggests to me that the truism here is nothing abstract, but rather an idea about how these philosophers relate to one another. Using the idea of the “crowd” put forth by one of the thinkers on the list, Elias Canetti, I want to propose that this relationship put forth by Amalfitano’s unconscious is one of fundamental equality rather than hierarchy and of plurality instead of singularity. These philosophers aren’t ordered chronologically, and they can’t possibly be organized in some sort of ranking of influence or preeminence; they all just constitute a dense crowd of philosophers. In the middle of a massed rank, Lull is among his peers through the ages, and, unlike the poor Jean-Marie Guyau, he seems to belong. He’s a particularly apt philosopher to use in this way, because the thinking machine he designed attempts to cycle through as many different propositional combinations as possible on its way to ultimate truth. In this way it’s committed to arriving at singular truth by *working through plurality*. The delusive belief that such truth can be arrived at makes the

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<sup>22</sup> “He drew a face and erased it and then immersed himself in the memory of the obliterated face. He remembered (but fleetingly, as one remembers a lightning bolt) Ramon Lull and his fantastic machine. Fantastic in its uselessness. When he looked at the blank sheet again he had written the following names in three columns:… For a while, Amalfitano read and reread the names, horizontally and vertically, from the center outward, from bottom to top, skipping and at random, and then he laughed and thought that the whole thing was a truism, in other words a proposition too obvious to formulate.” (206-7)

machine “prodigiously” useless but its combinatorial has a certain affinity to the way of thinking about individuals exhibited by *2666*. From its very first pages, in which Archiboldi is compared to a dizzying array of writers, the novel is perpetually placing individuals within carefully curated groups. This raises a reader’s hope that they might be able to figure out just what kind of writer Archiboldi is by pinpointing the common denominator shared by the motley group of writers he’s compared to. Ultimately, however, it just ends up reinforcing a sense of his singularity. Amalfitano’s actions in this scene serve as an allegory of this process: he sketches a portrait, erases it, and then, in the midst of a reverie about Lull, he replaces that portrait with an assemblage of names.

### **Amalfitano and the Writers**

Bereft of interlocutors in Santa Teresa, Amalfitano can only really imagine communing with other outsider intellectuals whom he’s read or read about. This is why he assembles his diagrams and fantasizes about meeting Guyau and Trendelenburg and also why he considers his book-on-the-clothesline experiment as a kind of tribute to Rafael Dieste (its author) and to Marcel Duchamp (theorist/inventor of the readymade) and why he muses on their biographies.

Which isn’t to say that all of the marginal writers he reads afford him solace and communion. The only extended bit of reading that we see him doing is of a real-life book, the bizarre Pinochet-era “history” *O’Higgins es araucano: 17 pruebas, tomadas de la Historia Decreta de la Araucanía*, in which the self-professed voice of his people Lonko Kilapán attempts not only to prove the indigenous origins of one of Chile’s founding fathers but also discourses on telepathy and the great secret influence that Araucanians have wielded not only in Chilean but also world history. In fact, it’s the account of telepathy which originally brings him to the strange book, as it might help account for the voice that he’s abused by almost nightly near the end of his section (276). But despite the vindication of telepathy and the sympathy that one might expect Amalfitano to feel for Kilapán’s *indigenista* project, whatever its faults, he ends up taking it apart implausibility by implausibility and even reaches the conclusion that Kilapán is, in the end, all of Chile, from the neofascist right to the communist left, from Pinochet to the street food vendors (287).<sup>23</sup>

Immediately following the remarkable Whitmanian listing of the Chilean multitudes contained in Kilapán’s prose, Amalfitano returns to the individual level:

Pero lo que de verdad buscaba era un nombre. El nombre de la madre telémeta de O’Higgins. Según Kilapán: Kintulay Treulen, hija de Killenkusi de Waramanke Treulen. Según la historia oficial: doña Isabel Riquelme. Llegado a este punto Amalfitano decidió dejar de contemplar el libro de Dieste que se mecía (ligerísimo) en la oscuridad, y

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<sup>23</sup> The passage, a kind of anti-*Canto General*, runs as follows: “La prosa de Kilapán, sin duda, podía ser la de Pinochet. Pero también podía ser la de Aylwin o de Lagos. La prosa de Kilapán podía ser la de Frei (lo que ya era mucho decir) o la de cualquier neofascista de la derecha. En la prosa de Kilapán no sólo cabían todos los estilos de Chile sino también todas las tendencias políticas, desde los conservadores hasta los comunistas, desde los nuevos liberales hasta los viejos sobrevivientes del MIR. Kilapán era el lujo del castellano hablado y escrito en Chile, en sus fraseos aparecía no sólo la nariz apergaminada del abate Molina, sino las carnicerías de Patricio Lynch, los interminables naufragios de la Esmeralda, el desierto de Atacama y las vacas pastando, las becas Guggenheim, los políticos socialistas alabando la política económica de la dictadura militar, las esquinas donde se vendían sopaipillas fritas, el mote con huesillos, el fantasma del muro de Berlín que ondeaba en las inmóviles banderas rojas, los maltratos familiares, las putas de buen corazón, las casas baratas, lo que en Chile llamaban resentimiento y que Amalfitano llamaba locura.” (225)

sentarse y pensar en el nombre de su propia madre: doña Eugenia Riquelme (en realidad doña Filia María Eugenia Riquelme Graña). Tuvo un breve sobresalto. Se le pusieron los pelos de punta por espacio de cinco segundos. Trató de reírse pero no pudo. (287)<sup>24</sup>

The telescoping of the grand tragedy of Chilean history in this sequence, which is so concisely evoked by references to a personal, family affair and a potential secret affinity is, I'd argue, a useful encapsulation of the way that *2666* deals with history: the great events and the great men are alluded to but what ends up receiving pride of place is an evoked, unarticulated but *felt* connection between distant individuals. And as with the diagrams, it is the names of these individuals that possess the utmost importance. As is the secrecy of the connection between them: Kilapán's secret history is such a fitting choice for Amalfitano to read because it is a meretriciously marginal text: while purporting to show the hidden influence of the oppressed Araucanians it actually plays into the hands of Chile's official mythography.<sup>25</sup>

And just as he detests the chauvinism of Kilapán, Amalfitano has no time for the reactionary anti-Mexican vitriol of Marco Antonio Guerra, the son of the Santa Teresa University dean who spends much of Amalfitano's section trying to get closer to him, to simultaneously become his student and to show him the truth about Santa Teresa. Right after his reading of Kilapán, Amalfitano is subjected to a diatribe by Guerra, who expresses his hatred of all Mexicans and voices his deeply cynical political fantasies until the professor brings him up short by moving their conversation to the realm of culture:

Si yo fuera el subcomandante Marcos, ¿sabe lo que haría? Lanzaría un ataque con todo mi ejército sobre una ciudad cualquiera de Chiapas, siempre y cuando tuviera una fuerte guarnición militar. Y allí inocularía a mis pobres indios. Y luego probablemente me iría a vivir a Miami. ¿Qué clase de música le gusta?, preguntó Amalfitano. La música clásica, maestro, Vivaldi, Cimarosa, Bach. ¿Y qué libros suele leer? Antes leía todo, maestro, y en grandes cantidades, hoy sólo leo poesía. Sólo la poesía no está contaminada, sólo la poesía está fuera del negocio. No sé si me entiende, maestro. Sólo la poesía, y no toda, eso que quede claro, es alimento sano y no mierda. (289)<sup>26</sup>

Guerra's radical pronouncements are much like those of the old man whom Archiboldi meets in Cologne: he too begins his ranting by expressing his complete mistrust of his countrymen and

<sup>24</sup> "But what he was really looking for was a name. The name of O'Higgins's telepathic mother. According to Kilapán: Kinturay Treulen, daughter of Killenkusi and Waramanke Treulen. According to the official story: Doña Isabel Riquelme. Having reached this point, Amalfitano decided to stop watching Dieste's book swaying (ever so lightly) in the darkness and sit down and think about his own mother's name: Doña Eugenia Riquelme (actually Doña Filia María Eugenia Riquelme Graña). He was briefly startled. For five seconds, his hair stood on end. He tried to laugh but he couldn't." (225).

<sup>25</sup> To borrow a term from elsewhere in the novel, Kilapán's book is what Boris Ansky would describe as suffused by *apariencia*, mere semblance or appearance. For more on this concept, see the discussion of Archiboldi and Ansky below.

<sup>26</sup> "If I were Subcomandante Marcos, you know what I'd do? I'd launch an attack with my whole army on any city in Chiapas, so long as it had a strong military garrison. And there I'd sacrifice my poor Indians. And then I'd probably go live in Miami. What kind of music do you like? asked Amalfitano. Classical music, Professor, Vivaldi, Cimarosa, Bach. And what books do you read? I used to read everything, Professor, I read all the time. Now all I read is poetry. Poetry is the one thing that isn't contaminated, the one thing that isn't part of the game. I don't know if you follow me, Professor. Only poetry—and let me be clear, only some of it—is good for you, only poetry isn't shit." (226)

also passes down judgments about what constitutes true art from on high. For all of his bluster, he's not a wholly unsympathetic figure, either: he's an outsider himself, not an organization man like his father, and his belief that his country and the modern cultural landscape in general are equally irredeemable isn't *prima facie* ridiculous, especially given the picture of the world 2666 shows us.

Amalfitano, who has no time for Guerra's father or his own colleagues at the university, seems to acknowledge that he and Marcos have some common ground by asking him about his cultural preferences. Of course, he may also merely be attempting to cut Guerra's violent fantasizing short, but there's the distinct possibility that he's trying to find a kind of cultural common ground with the disaffected young man. Guerra's exclusive devotion to the great masters of the musical baroque doesn't seem to afford an occasion for connection but the decision to include a tiny personal canon, one that makes room for Cimarrosa in between two more firmly canonized figures, is quite familiar by this point, as is the general Adornian sentiment that art must be oppositional or autonomous. In fact, even though Guerra could never be mistaken for a Frankfurt School dialectician, the invocation of classical music and lyric poetry as the privileged redoubts against the corrupting influence of the culture industry certainly conjures up the ghost of Adorno.

Amalfitano doesn't respond to Guerra's theorizing however; he is only goaded into a response when the young man gives his literary taste a certain concreteness by naming the Austrian poet Georg Trakl. As he does when he sees the names of the writers in his diagrams, Amalfitano immediately thinks of Trakl's biography rather than of his work. As I discussed in the introduction, his reflections soon snowball into the single most famous passage in all of 2666—the highly excerpt-able vindication of “great,” “imperfect,” “torrential” works over smaller, perfectly achieved ones that Ignacio Echevarría cites in his final note to the first edition to the novel and that seems to perfectly capture Bolaño's grand ambitions for his final work—but they, the reflections, begin where the old man in Cologne's speech ends: with a story about the discovery of literary genius in an unlikely place. Amalfitano recalls a bookish young pharmacist whom he used to buy medicine from when he lived in Barcelona and who “perhaps in another life was Trakl, or who perhaps in this life was still destined to write poems as desperate as those of his distant Austrian colleague, who clearly preferred, without discussion, the minor to the mayor work” (289). Amalfitano might be in the process of indicting the young pharmacist for his unambitious reading habits and constructing a declinist narrative of his own—“*ya ni los farmacéuticos ilustrados se atreven con las grandes obras*”—but there's a certain generosity in his assumptions about this near-stranger. Based solely on the pharmacist's job and love of reading, Amalfitano suspects him of a particular kind of literary greatness. Trakl's lyrics and the lower-stakes short stories and novellas that the pharmacist favors both suggest a turning away from the true horror and complexity of the world that Amalfitano especially values, and this is a disappointment to him precisely *because* he esteems sad young literary men so highly (as all the names we've gone through so far suggest, Amalfitano's identification of literary kinship doesn't extend to women): he describes the pharmacist's lack of interest in “great” works as a “sad paradox,” thus implying that it is precisely young organic intellectuals like him who should be especially receptive to that ambition and to the kind of greatness that's only possible when a writer faces down that “*ese aquello que nos atemoriza a todos*,” that something-out-there that fills us all with dread (290).

I think a lot depends on the *todos* in that sentence because after the great many strictly individual connections and identifications that Amalfitano has made over the course of the novel,

here he finally, if only briefly and extremely vaguely, articulates his sense of belonging to a collective. Unlike the old man in Cologne, who can only think of the greatness of great writers and great works as an implicit judgment about his own worthlessness and of the worthlessness of others like him, Amalfitano feels that the great works he praises confront horrors that he himself feels cowed by: “ese aquello que acoquina y encacha.” To quote Borges: *No nos une el amor, sino el espanto*.

Amalfitano’s entire narrative in *2666* is one of failed connections. He first appears in the first section, and though he happens to be one of the very people in Santa Teresa who knows and appreciates Archimboldi, he never really connects with the European critics, who are clueless enough to ask what he, a leftwing Chilean intellectual, was doing in Argentina in 1974 (156), and his entire section is composed of estrangements: from his wife and daughter, from the likes of Marcos Guerra and, on the page, Lonko Kilapán. He only achieves a sense of identification with forgotten or nearly forgotten figures like Guyau, Rafael Dieste, or the mother of Bernardo O’Higgins. This is why his tribute to the writers of the great torrential works is such a departure from what has come before and why it reads like the emotional climax to his entire story. At last, for once, obscurity is no longer the sole criterion by which Amalfitano identifies someone as being like himself. All of a sudden, a writer as famous and successful as Charles Dickens receives his praise for taking on that something-out-there, and not in his most critically-acclaimed masterpieces like *Bleak House* or *Our Mutual Friend*, but in his popular successes *The Pickwick Papers* and *A Tale of Two Cities*. Confronted by Guerra’s explicitly elitist discourse in favor of uncontaminated poetry and by the young pharmacist’s preference for the shorter works of the masters, Amalfitano assembles a collection of loose, baggy monsters that unabashedly take in a great deal of the world without trying to force it into some kind of manageable, domesticated form.

Because it mentions famous, actually existing texts, Amalfitano’s tribute to long books is easy to isolate and to judge on its own merits. I hope to have demonstrated, however, that, placed in its proper context as the culmination of Amalfitano’s arc as a reader, it can be understood as the closest that this forlorn man gets to affirming a sense of belonging to a kind of imagined community. Because he’s spurred to articulate this sense of belonging against the attempts by Guerra to become his student, to enter into a more substantial pedagogical relationship with him, there’s a certain poignancy and irony to the end of his story. For Guerra, Amalfitano clearly possesses a kind of authority that he doesn’t believe himself to have. This can help us to remember that, as affirming as Amalfitano’s commendation of this set of novels is, it is cast as a lament that in the world of today, young readers like Guerra and the unnamed pharmacist prefer short stories or poetry to long, involved fiction. Amalfitano’s sense of belonging then, is predicated on his estrangement from those around him.

What has turned out to be this long book’s most excerpted and famously self-referential passage is thus a pained reflection on how readers nowadays don’t read long books. But this reflection is not, or at least is not only, elitist hand-wringing over declining standards: it’s in fact a response to Guerra’s contention that reading should entail a turning away from the world rather than a confrontation with it. For Amalfitano, the “great, imperfect, torrential work” is laudable because it faces up to the worst that is out there in the world. *2666* does this, especially in its long middle section devoted to the femicides of Santa Teresa. Before taking a look at this sequence in my next chapter however, I want to investigate the narrative of Benno von Archimboldi and his readers, which bookends the Santa Teresa stories and which contains examples of the different uses of literature that have cropped up in the passages discussed above:

of reading as a way of separating oneself out from a crowd and of reading and writing as ways of securing a legacy or of establishing a bond with another across time and space. One of the great sources of pathos in Bolaño's depiction of the violence in Santa Teresa is that it's almost, but not completely, free of the kind of bookishness that absolutely saturates the rest of the novel. It's to the use and abuse of literature in the lives of certain characters in *2666* that I now turn.

### **Pelletier and Archimboldi**

Of the many acts which *2666* records over its thousand or so pages, the very first one is an act of reading. It receives much the same kind of reportorial treatment that so many subsequent events will receive: we find out precisely when (Christmas, 1980) and where (a Parisian garret) the 19-year-old university student Jean-Claude Pelletier first read *D'Arsonval*, a novel by Benno von Archimboldi. After the tersely factual opening sentences, the pretense of pure objectivity falls away:

El joven Pelletier ignoraba entonces, que esa novela era parte de una trilogía (compuesta por *El jardín*, de tema inglés, *La máscara de cuero*, de tema polaco, así como *D'Arsonval* era evidentemente, de tema francés), pero esa ignorancia o ese vacío o esa dejadez bibliográfica, que sólo podía ser achacada a su extrema juventud, no restó un ápice del deslumbramiento y de la admiración que le produjo la novela. (15)<sup>27</sup>

The slightly pedantic and patronizing but ultimately forgiving tone struck here characterizes much of the narration in the novel to come. The complaint that Pelletier should have known better is an odd one given that the upshot of these first few pages is that, in time, he will become the preeminent French Archimboldian, but it serves to quickly and economically introduce the problematic of literary knowledge that we've already investigated in looking at the old German and Amalfitano and that thoroughly dominates the "Part About the Critics." The question of how well read someone is, first opened here, matters intensely to the critics whose stories take up *2666*'s first few hundred pages, three men and a woman who, to varying degrees, define themselves through their knowledge of Archimboldi's oeuvre.

In these opening pages, the story of how Jean-Claude Pelletier comes to do this is told twice: first, we get a radically telescoped account of his academic ascendancy, of how he leveraged his professors' complete ignorance of this writer into a position of certain prominence in the French academy, and then we get a richly detailed recounting of that fateful first night of reading. That recollection is itself divided into two parts: one paragraph about how much Pelletier detested having to live in a *chambre de bonne* and share a bathroom with fifteen strangers who disgusted him (like the hero of a Balzac or Stendhal novel, he's clearly a young man on the make) and another about the sheer willpower that he exhibited, that he *incarnated* ("como si todo él fuera voluntad hecha carne, huesos y músculos, nada de grasa, fanático y decidido a llegar a buen puerto"<sup>28</sup>) during that night of reading and that he decides is the only thing about his time in the garret that he ought to remember, so that *el brillo*, the shine, doesn't wear off his new career as a critic (17).

<sup>27</sup> "The young Pelletier didn't realize at the time that the novel was part of a trilogy (made up of the English-themed *The Garden* and the Polish-themed *The Leather Mask*, together with the clearly French-themed *D'Arsonval*), but this ignorance or lapse or bibliographical lacuna, attributable only to his extreme youth, did nothing to diminish the wonder and admiration that the novel stirred in him." (3)

<sup>28</sup> "as if he were pure will made flesh, bone, and muscle without an ounce of fat, fanatical and bent on success." (5)



By digging up these memories of the disgusting garret, just as it underlined his ignorance about the connections between Archimboldi's novels, the novel is undermining Pelletier's expressly stated wishes and his sense of his new self. It is ironizing and implicitly judging both his desire to hold himself apart from those around him through his reading and his own, over-emotional reaction to his reading, to all the crying that he does as he considers his "youthful apprenticeship." At the same time, the selection of his solitary reading experience as the starting point for the novel as a whole is undoubtedly a sign of its importance and, as the cases of Amalfitano and Archimboldi help to confirm, the affirmation of the kind of effortful reading he engages in is, at least in part, un-ironic, a worthwhile and even courageous pursuit.

The absolute self-assurance and mastery over Archimboldi's work that Pelletier wills himself to have as the novel opens is wholly undone by the time "The Part about the Critics" draws to a close. In fact, the entire section can be described as a descent, as the four Archimboldians, but especially Pelletier, their macho, self-appointed leader, lose their self-belief as interpreters with a privileged understanding of Archimboldi. There are, to be sure, differences between them, but at the beginning of their story they come together to form a kind of vanguard Archimboldian unit, as in the memorable mock-heroic description of a literary conference as a nineteenth-century field of war: "Pelletier, secundado por Morini y Espinoza, pasó al ataque como Napoleón en Jena y no tardaron en desbandarse hacia las cafeterías y tabernas de Bremen las derrotadas banderas de Pohl, Schwarz y Borchmeyer"<sup>29</sup> (26). This conference, at which the quartet first comes together, is the high-water mark of the critics' careers: Pelletier and Espinoza dazzle the audience with "una visión dionisiaca, festiva, de exégesis de último carnaval (o penúltimo carnaval)" and Liz Norton intervenes to save her future comrades-in-arms, and lovers, "como un Lannes, una amazona rubia que hablaba un alemán correctísimo" (26-7).<sup>30</sup>

In this early triumphant period the critics forge themselves into an exclusive Archimboldian clique. At literary conferences any fellow scholars who hang out with them know that they need to retire early, "como si entendieran que la figura de cuatro ángulos que componían los archimboldianos era impenetrable y también, a esa hora de la noche, susceptible de volverse violentamente contra cualquier injerencia ajena"<sup>31</sup> (30). In fact, the members of the group seem to have time only for one another: we never learn anything about their other friends or families. We don't even spend any time with their colleagues or at their home institutions. It's become a critical commonplace to say that each of the sections of *2666* is a parody or a reworking of a different novelistic genre and that "Critics" is Bolaño's take on academic fiction. Peter Elmore, for instance, writes that "*La parte de los críticos*...se relaciona, paródicamente, con el *thriller* académico y la 'novela de campus', subgéneros frecuentados sobre todo en el medio anglosajón"<sup>32</sup> (*Bolaño salvaje*, 280). This feels off insofar as this particular novel, and Bolaño's fiction more generally (give or take a loosely academically-affiliated poetry workshop

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<sup>29</sup> "Pelletier, backed by Morini and Espinoza, went on the attack like Napoleon at Jena, assaulting the unsuspecting German Archimboldi scholars, and the downed flags of Pohl, Schwarz, and Borchmeyer were soon routed to the cafés and taverns of Bremen." (12)

<sup>30</sup> "the festive, Dionysian vision of ultimate carnival (or penultimate carnival) exegesis upheld by Pelletier and Espinoza...like a Lannes, a blond Amazon who spoke excellent German." (12)  
For more on Liz Norton and the ways in which she both conforms and deviates from various sexist stereotypes, see Chapter 2.

<sup>31</sup> "as if they understood that the four-cornered figure formed by the Archimboldians was inviolable and also liable to react violently to any outside interference at that hour of the night." (15)

<sup>32</sup> The "Part about the Critics" has a parodic relationship to the academic thriller and the campus novel, subgenres especially popular in the Anglo-Saxon world. (translation mine)

or two), is not at all interested in the mores and internal politics of university communities as such.<sup>33</sup> When the critics—and note that they’re primarily designated as *critics* rather than professors<sup>34</sup>—get together, they do so in major cities where they have the random encounters that take up so much of *2666* as a whole.

Eventually Pelletier, Espinoza, and Norton, who at this point have formed a love triangle as unresolved and opaque in its dynamics to them as it is to us as readers, decide to fly to Santa Teresa in order to pursue a clue that might lead them to the whereabouts of Archiboldi. In Mexico, the trio is collectively appalled by the chaos and casual violence of the city, but the reactions between Pelletier and Espinoza on the one hand, and Norton on the other, begin to diverge. Their first impressions of Amalfitano are telling: for the two men he is primarily “a failed man, above all because he had lived and taught in Europe” while for Norton he was “un tipo muy triste, que se apagaba a pasos de gigante” (153).<sup>35</sup> One might suppose that their shared reading or their common status as foreigners in Santa Teresa might bring the critics and the philosophy professor together, but a painfully awkward set of misunderstandings arise precisely when they’re discussing their shared expertise in Benno von Archiboldi. First, when asked about why he was in Argentina in 1974 when he published a translation of one of Archiboldi’s novels, Amalfitano has to patiently inform the critics about Pinochet’s coup. And in their very next conversation, when the critics pompously proclaim that “no es justo que el mejor escritor alemán del siglo XX se muera sin poder hablar con quienes mejor han leído sus novelas,”<sup>36</sup> Amalfitano makes them walk back that claim about Archiboldi by reminding them of Kafka, and when they try to qualify it by saying that Archiboldi was the greatest of the postwar era he still demurs, bringing up Thomas Bernhard and Peter Handke, only to be attacked “hasta quedar reducido a una especie de Periquillo Sarniento abierto en canal y sin una sola pluma”<sup>37</sup> (158). The invocation of Lizardi’s *Mangy Parrot*, that icon of Mexican and Latin American cultural independence, is a detail typical of Bolaño’s ironic and allusive style: it calls up the specter of European colonial paternalism and the resistance to it in order to cap a series of exchanges in which a group of Europeans both reveal their ignorance of Latin American reality and get defensive when a Latin American makes an informed evaluative claim about European literature, all while introducing a certain note of violence as a way of demonstrating the stakes such debates about literature have for these characters.

That small rhetorical “victory” is one of the last positive experiences that the critics have in Mexico. When Norton abruptly flies back to Europe, Pelletier and Espinoza find themselves caught completely off guard. Bolaño draws the section to a close by interlacing three narrative strands: (1) the long, nearly identical email that Norton wrote to her two abandoned lovers

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<sup>33</sup> For a discussion of U.S. academic fiction, see Elaine Showalter *Faculty Towers: Academic Fiction and its Discontents*.

<sup>34</sup> The ambitious five-hour dramatization of *2666* that Robert Falls and Seth Bockley premiered at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago in early 2016 changes the name of this section to “The Part about the Academics,” perhaps prompted by the greater popularity of academic fiction in the U.S. context mentioned by Elmore.

<sup>35</sup> “A sad man whose life was ebbing swiftly away” (114).

Bolaño gets a lot of mileage out of the idiomatic phrase “pasos de gigante” in *2666*. For more examples, see the discussions of Archiboldi below.

<sup>36</sup> “It isn’t right that the greatest German writer of the twentieth century should die without being offered the chance to speak to the readers who know his novels best.” (118)

<sup>37</sup> “until he resembled the bird in Azuela’s *Mangy Parrot*, gutted and plucked to the last feather” (118)

While it makes some sense that an English translation would add the name of an author to pinpoint the allusion, it’s curious that Azuela rather than Lizardi comes up in this moment. It’s an extra-textual failure of translation of the very kind that the critics and Amalfitano are engaging in at this point in the novel.

detailing the thoughts and memories that the “horrible city” of Santa Teresa had stirred up in her,<sup>38</sup> (2) Espinoza’s wanderings through the city and the affair he begins with Rebeca, a young carpet-seller who precisely fits the profile of a possible victim of femicide; and (3) an account of Pelletier’s refusal to leave the hotel and his obsessive rereading of Archimboldi’s fiction. This sequence amounts to a three-pronged elaboration on Pelletier’s collapsed sense of mastery: while Norton turns away from the horror of Santa Teresa in order to find moments of tenderness in her past and hopes to secure some affection, however tentative, for the future—by the end of her email she’s revealed that she’s gotten together with Morini, the depressive, paraplegic, most empathetic man of the three—and Espinoza finds temporary solace with the silent, inscrutable Rebeca (their affair is rendered elliptically, somewhere between a romantic idyll and an exploitative instance of sex tourism), Pelletier resigns himself to doing nothing but reading books that he’s lived with for years but that he only now finds inscrutable. He tells Espinoza about one of them, *Santo Tomás*, with newfound Socratic modesty, “que había cosas que aún no entendía y que probablemente no iba a entender jamás” (194).<sup>39</sup>

Pelletier himself becomes enigmatic to his friend, much as Amalfitano (with whom he shares an afternoon of conversation about Archimboldi) is to those around him, and at the very end of the section, when Espinoza wants to know if they have plans to go back to Europe, he brings forth the conclusion that his reading has led him to: that contrary to the evidence of their fruitless search, he’s absolutely certain that Archimboldi is in Santa Teresa. Bolaño renders Pelletier’s revelation especially discomfiting by combining the idyllic with the morbid: the two men are talking under the starry desert sky in the hotel’s recreation area and Pelletier’s voice is “como la brisa que soplabá en ese instante y que impregnaba todo con un aroma de flores”<sup>40</sup> (206). Espinoza wants to know why they haven’t found him but Pelletier claims that that’s immaterial, that what matters is that Archimboldi’s here: “está aquí—dijo Pelletier, y señaló la sauna, el hotel, la pista, las rejas metálicas, la hojarasca que se adivinaba más allá, en los terrenos del hotel no iluminados. A Espinoza se le erizaron los pelos del espinazo. La caja de cemento en donde estaba la sauna le pareció un búnker con un muerto en su interior”<sup>41</sup> (207). While it’s Espinoza who’s wandered the city, it’s Pelletier who’s developed a passionate conviction about the city, namely, that Archimboldi is there. What this conviction means isn’t exactly clear, but it suggests at the very least that whatever is contained in Archimboldi’s work matches the city’s uncanny atmosphere of violence.

His insistence that it doesn’t matter whether they find him or not is also meaningful in and of itself: he, and to a lesser extent his fellow critics, set out to meet and interview their literary hero as his self-appointed greatest readers. As we saw in the novel’s opening, Archimboldi’s work was once the means Pelletier used to launch his career and to forever set

<sup>38</sup> For a longer consideration of Liz Norton’s letter, see Chapter 2 below.

<sup>39</sup> “there were still things that he didn’t understand and probably never would.” (147)

Late in the novel, in “The Part About Archimboldi,” there is a very brief précis of *Santo Tomás*’s plot: “la biografía apócrifa de un biógrafo cuyo biografado es un gran escritor del régimen nazi, en donde algunos críticos quisieron ver retratado a Ernst Jünger, aunque evidentemente no se trataba de Jünger sino de un personaje de ficción, por llamarlo de alguna manera” (1059-60).

“the apocryphal biography of a biographer whose subject is a great writer of the Nazi regime, in which some critics wanted to see a likeness of Ernst Jünger, although clearly it isn’t Jünger but a fictional character.” (846)

<sup>40</sup> “like the breeze that was blowing just then, suffusing everything with the scent of flowers.” (158)

<sup>41</sup> “he’s here, said Pelletier, and he motioned toward the sauna, the hotel, the court, the fence, the dry brush that could be glimpsed in the distance, on the unlit hotel grounds. The hair rose on the back of Espinoza’s neck. The cement box where the sauna was looked like a bunker holding a corpse.” (158)

himself apart from his fellow provincials. Traveling to Santa Teresa, far from his comfortable European base, allows him to read the work with new eyes and to appreciate what is disquieting within it. It's hard to not read Espinoza as readerly stand-in at this moment: not only does the hair on his neck stand up, he also assures Pelletier that he believes what he's trying to convey: "Te creo –dijo, y en verdad creía lo que decía su amigo"<sup>42</sup> (207). This supererogatory assurance of sincerity on the narrator's part feels like it's meant to reassure us too: Pelletier has not lost the plot completely; the indescribable presence that he's gesturing at is palpable in the air, as it were.

There is an unmistakable connection between the end of this first section and Amalfitano's reflections on the works he considers great at the end of the second. In both cases it's suggested that the value of great literature is derived from its ability to confront the world at its darkest, and a personal relationship between the heroic writer and the heroic reader is affirmed as both are characterized as capable of facing the world as it is rather than evading it by disregarding the darkness that's there in the work (as Pelletier did in his previous reading of Archimboldi) or by choosing to read works that somehow fail to reproduce that darkness through their too-limited, too-perfect form (as Guerra and the bookish pharmacist do in Amalfitano's eyes). Also in both cases, that unnamed evil can be given a local habitation and a name: both Pelletier and Amalfitano are intensely aware that they have been pursuing their reading in a city where hundreds of young women are being abducted and murdered. Bolaño will get to his own attempt to confront that horror in time—uniting his five novels in one is his way of ensuring that not one of them gives the illusion of adequacy or commensuratness to the horror he wants to confront—but for now he abandons each of these characters in the moment when it seems like all they have is a confirmation that they're not alone in their fear, that others have confronted something similar and turned their experience into art. Their attempts to solve the mystery of Archimboldi's fiction have reached an endpoint that's essentially anticlimactic: Ahab may be destroyed by Moby Dick, but he at least gets to confront his quarry at the end of his quest. By contrast, Pelletier's last words suggest complete resignation: "Archimboldi está aquí...y nosotros estamos aquí, y esto es lo más cerca que jamás estaremos de él"<sup>43</sup> (207).

### **Archimboldi and Ansky**

Given that the novel's first three sections all end with invocations of a different aspect of the Archimboldi myth—his inevitable presence in the heart of darkness, his status as the kind of heroic writer capable of unflinchingly confronting that darkness in his art, and his great literal stature and his identity as a German deeply connected to a faraway land of dark forests, so different yet also so much like the deserts of northern Mexico—the biography which makes up the fifth and final section of *2666* can't help but read like a sustained dilution of that myth, and a reconfiguration of it as well. It's not that Hans Reiter is substantially different from the myth that's been constructed around him: in the first handful of pages of his story we learn that even as a child he is indeed extremely tall and thin and that he's happiest while diving among the aquatic flora of the North Sea, where he seems to belong. He's not at all an unremarkable young man—as his emblem and obsession, the seaweed, suggests, he's far more at home outside of society, immersed in a wholly other medium, than within it, but his story is told in essentially the same way, by essentially the same voice, as the other life stories in *2666*, and that helps to subtly unite him with the other loners that we have seen.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>42</sup> "I believe you, he said, and he really did believe what his friend was saying." (159)

<sup>43</sup> "Archimboldi is here, said Pelletier, and we're here, and this is the closest we'll ever be to him." (159)

<sup>44</sup> For a discussion of Reiter's first bookish enthusiasm, see Chapter 3 below.

And like them, he ends up forming one of his most intense connections with someone whom he meets on the page: the young Ukrainian Jewish writer and political radical Boris Ansky. Reiter reads Ansky's notebooks, writings that seem to contain, in hyper-condensed form, the whole of early Soviet cultural politics, from the glory days of the revolution through the Stalinist show trials and purges all the way up to the breakout of World War II. The notebooks, which we experience in a curiously mediated form, with occasional remarks about how Reiter himself reacted to them, can be divided in two, with a dramatic fall in the middle. The first is devoted to Ansky's youth and young manhood, and in particular to his relationship with the failed writer Ivánov, who achieves the great fame that he craves by publishing three novels ghost written by Ansky himself but who is eventually indicted and executed, precisely for those novels.<sup>45</sup> Ansky's writings then change: "A partir de la muerte de Ivánov el cuaderno de Ansky se vuelve caótico, aparentemente inconexo, aunque en medio del caos Reiter encontró una estructura y cierto orden. Habla de los escritores. Dice que los únicos escritores viables (aunque no explica a qué se refiere con la palabra viable) son los que provienen del lumpen y de la aristocracia..." (910).<sup>46</sup> Lists of names, aesthetic categorizations and hierarchies, a refusal to clarify one's unorthodox deployment of terms, a general accounting of the writers that one feels more closely allied to than one's peers: these are all tropes that have recurred throughout *2666*. The discernment of a hidden order, which Reiter is presumably performing and the narrative voice is reproducing for us, also matters: since Ansky's writings are not being quoted directly, what we have access to must be a more accessible digest of what Reiter is actually poring over in that crawlspace.

It's in this very personal roster that Reiter first encounters the name of the Milanese painter Arcimboldo, a modified version of which he'll eventually hide behind. We actually get verbatim reproductions of Ansky's notes on Arcimboldo ("*El jurista...* le parecía un cuadro de terror. Pero los cuadros de las cuatro estaciones eran alegría pura, todo dentro de todo, escribe Ansky"<sup>47</sup>) that culminate, like so many of the invocations of artists and writers in *2666*, with an anecdote, a tiny but meaningful biographical detail that then shades into an affirmation of the importance of art as a source of solace in dark times:

Y aquí Ansky desmiente su falta de interés por la vida del pintor y escribe que cuando Leonardo da Vinci deja Milán en 1516 lega a su discípulo Bernardino Luini sus libros de notas y algunos dibujos, los cuales, pasado el tiempo, el joven Arcimboldo, amigo del hijo de Luini, habría tal vez consultado y estudiado. Cuando estoy triste o abatido, escribe Ansky, cierro los ojos y revivo los cuadros de Arcimboldo y la tristeza y el abatimiento se deshacen, como si un viento superior a ellos, un viento *mentolado*, soplara de pronto por las calles de Moscú. (918)<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> In marked contrast to Archimboldi's own works, these novels' plots are lavishly recounted. They are science fiction epics set all over the world that feature several points of contact with the stories contained in *2666*.

<sup>46</sup> "After Ivanov's death, Ansky's notes grow chaotic, apparently haphazard, although amid the chaos Reiter divined a structure and a kind of order. Ansky talks about writers. He says the only viable writers (although he doesn't explain what he means by viable) are those from the underclass and the aristocracy." (728)

<sup>47</sup> "*The Lawyer...* was also like a horror painting. But the paintings of the four seasons were pure bliss. Everything in everything, writes Ansky." (734)

<sup>48</sup> "And here Ansky belies his lack of interest in the painter's life and writes that when Leonardo da Vinci left Milan in 1516 he bequeathed his notebooks and some drawings to his disciple Bernardo Luini, which in time the young Arcimboldo, friend of Luini's son, might possibly have consulted and studied. When I'm sad or in low spirits, writes

It's fitting that this discussion of a master of the trompe-l'oeil is itself a feat of *mise-en-abyme* trickery ("todo dentro de todo"). Lives come together as Arcimboldo's reception of da Vinci's legacy is combined with Ansky's reception of Arcimboldo's own legacy, all while Reiter reads and studies a precious notebook himself: Ansky's. And this experience of transmission is all likened to the arrival of a benevolent (Florentine?) wind in the nightmarish Moscow of the late thirties, a wind that Ansky can call upon at will by simply closing his eyes and thinking of the paintings (cf. Amalfitano).

At this juncture we might well ask whether Reiter's relationship to Ansky is much like Ansky's own sustaining, refreshing relationship to Arcimboldo. In truth, while Reiter derives considerable sustenance and inspiration from Ansky's writings, their shared positions as dissenters and artists doesn't transcend their identities as, respectively, a German soldier and a disappeared Ukrainian Jew. Rather than an escape from the war, Reiter's reading of Ansky becomes one of his painful and guilt-ridden experiences of the war:

Durante varios días Reiter pensó que había sido él quién le había disparado a Ansky. Por las noches tenía pesadillas horribles que lo despertaban y lo hacían llorar. A veces se quedaba quieto, ovillado en la cama, escuchando cómo caía la nieve sobre la aldea. Ya no pensaba en el suicidio, porque se creía muerto. Por las mañanas lo primero que hacía era leer el cuaderno de Ansky, que habría por cualquier página. Otras veces daba largos paseos por el bosque nevado, hasta llegar al viejo *sovjoz* en donde los ucranianos trabajaban a las órdenes de los desganados alemanes. (921)<sup>49</sup>

This is a microcosm of the account of Reiter's struggle with Ansky's legacy as a whole: he simultaneously feels like Ansky's executioner and like Ansky himself ("todo dentro de todo"). And even though the weight gives him horrible dreams (several of which are described) and immobilizes him, he continues to read the notebooks compulsively and unsystematically. It's not wholly clear why he does this, but the juxtaposition of his reading with his visits to the work camp suggest that his immersion in Ansky's world is his way of coming to terms with what he and his fellow Germans are doing to Ansky's people. Like Pelletier and Amalfitano in Santa Teresa, Reiter's reading occurs in the shadow of systematic violence, but more than a simple turning away, it entails a kind of reckoning with that violence. We can't know for sure what Archimboldi's novels are about, but we do know that Kilapán's disingenuous secret history, for all that it attempts to vindicate the Araucanians, just makes the dictatorship's violence present for Amalfitano and that Ansky's notebooks contain both the great promise of October and its subsequent betrayal.

In the middle of his obsession with Ansky, Reiter is called away from Ansky's village of Kostekino, and though he ranges far from that locus of violence, he continues to read the notebooks. After months of wandering, he improbably makes it back to a now-empty Kostekino, where the garrison and the work camp have been emptied out. The first thing Reiter does is to

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Ansky, I close my eyes and think of Arcimboldo's paintings and the sadness and gloom evaporate, as if a strong wind, a *mentholated* wind, were suddenly blowing along the streets of Moscow." (734-5)

<sup>49</sup> "For several days Reiter thought he had been the one who shot Ansky. At night he had horrible nightmares that woke him up and made him weep. Sometimes he lay still, curled up in bed, listening to the snow fall on the village. He no longer thought about suicide, because he believed he was dead. In the mornings the first thing he did was read Ansky's notebook, opening it at random. At other times during the day he took long walks in the snowy forest, until he reached the old sovkhos where the Ukrainians worked under the orders of two listless Germans." (737)

return to Ansky's cottage, where he experiences a freedom unlike any he's ever experienced before. In accounting for this unexpected sense of freedom, Reiter culminates his reckoning with his Soviet counterpart. Even though his sense of release feels intensely real and meaningfully different from his physical state ("aunque mal alimentado y por ende débil, también se sentía con fuerzas para prolongar ese impulso de libertad, de soberanía, hasta donde fuera posible" (926)),<sup>50</sup> he suspects that it might be one of those mirages that Ansky classed under the term *apariencia*. Reiter's rumination on Ansky's concept of *apariencia* is the most sustained representation of his thinking in the whole of *2666* and is worth citing in full:

La apariencia era una fuerza de ocupación de la realidad, se dijo, incluso de la realidad más extrema y limítrofe. Vivía en las almas de la gente y también en sus gestos, en la voluntad y en el dolor, en la forma en que uno ordena los recuerdos y en la forma en que uno ordena las prioridades. La apariencia proliferaba en los salones de los industriales y en el hampa. Dictaba normas, se revolvía contra sus propias normas (en revueltas que podían ser sangrientas, pero que no por eso dejaban de ser aparentes), dictaba nuevas normas.

El nacionalsocialismo era el reino absoluto de la apariencia. Amar, reflexionó, por regla general es otra apariencia. Mi amor por Lotte no es apariencia. Lotte es mi hermana y es pequeña y cree que soy un gigante. Pero el amor, el amor común y corriente, el amor de pareja, con desayunos y cenas, con celos y dinero y tristeza, es teatro, es decir es apariencia. La juventud es la apariencia de la fuerza, el amor es la apariencia de la paz. Ni juventud ni fuerza ni amor ni paz pueden serme otorgadas, se dijo con un suspiro, ni yo puedo aceptar un regalo semejante. Sólo el vagabundeo de Ansky no es apariencia, pensó, sólo los catorce años de Ansky no son apariencia. Ansky vivió toda su vida en una inmadurez rabiosa porque la revolución, la verdadera y única, también es inmadura. Después se durmió y no tuvo sueños... (926)<sup>51</sup>

This is something we've seen before: Reiter finds the refutation of Ansky's protean concept of *apariencia*<sup>52</sup> not in any other idea but in certain biographical facts: his own love for his little sister, Ansky's decision to enroll in the Red Army when he's only fourteen and his subsequent years of wandering. Reiter's most concise and direct tribute to the young man whom he has

<sup>50</sup> Although malnourished and weak, he also felt the strength to prolong as far as possible this impulse of freedom, of sovereignty." (741, translation modified)

<sup>51</sup> "Semblance was an occupying force of reality, he said to himself, even the most extreme, borderline reality. It lived in people's souls and their actions, in willpower and in pain, in the way memories and priorities were ordered. Semblance proliferated in the salons of the industrialists and in the underworld. It set the rules, it rebelled against its own rules (in uprisings that could be bloody, but didn't therefor cease to be semblance), it set new rules.

National Socialism was the ultimate realm of semblance. As a general rule, he reflected, love was also semblance. My love for Lotte isn't semblance. Lotte is my sister and she's little and she thinks I'm a giant. But love, ordinary love, the love of a man and a woman, with breakfasts and dinners, with jealousy and money and sadness, is playacting, or semblance. Youth is the semblance of strength, love is the semblance of peace. Neither youth nor strength nor love nor peace can be granted to me, he said to himself with a sigh, nor can I accept such a gift. Only Ansky's wandering isn't semblance, he thought, only Ansky at fourteen isn't semblance. Ansky lived his whole life in rabid immaturity because the revolution, the one true revolution, is also immature. Then he fell asleep and didn't dream..." (741)

<sup>52</sup> Natasha Wimmer translates *apariencia* as "semblance" and while that makes sense given the standard rendering of the German *Schein* into Spanish, "semblance" is more rare and feels more technical in English than "apariencia" does in Spanish, where it is as common as "appearance."

come to respect and admire so much doubles as a condemnation of almost the entire world around him as inauthentic. Not only Nazism and Stalinism but also everyday life and love and mores and memories are all subject to *apariencia*. If we want to get any sense of what the “true and only” revolution might be, we have to read and understand Ansky’s account of his brief life, his outlandish science fiction novels, the art and literature that he loves: no abstract set of concepts could ever communicate as much as these personal jottings.

But even though Ansky was able to elude the occupying force of *apariencia* in his writings, it was only because he put himself out there in the world and amassed all the experience that he did at such a young age that he had something to distill onto the page. Ansky’s *vagabundeo*, his years of errant wandering,<sup>53</sup> involved direct, if marginal, participation in the great upheavals of early Soviet history, just as Reiter himself witnesses the rise and fall of the Third Reich and, in the process, amasses a fund of experience that he will draw on when he becomes a novelist after the war.

As we saw at the beginning of this chapter, when Reiter composes his first novel after the war he rents a typewriter from an old man in Cologne whose intrusiveness prompts him to take on the name Archimboldi and who, in the course of his long speech on the forest of literature, uses the term *apariencia* to describe the fantasy of “minor” writers who believe that they’re doing more than just plagiarizing the work of truly major writers (983). That old man’s ramblings resonate with Ansky’s writings—both of them execrate mere appearance, which they associate with theatricality<sup>54</sup>—but their two approaches to literature also differ in critical ways: for all that he claims to feel contempt for literary fame, the old man is clearly obsessed with it, while Ansky decided to ghostwrite for Ivánov, or, more precisely, to publish his work under his older, blocked, recognition-starved friend’s name, as a way to practice literature while foreclosing the very possibility of becoming famous.

And while the old German gave up writing in order to settle into a life of relative peace (or so he claims; the intensity of his speech belies him), Ansky writes until the war makes his writing and ruminating unfeasible: the last page of his notebook is described as containing a drawn map of his route to join the guerrilla resistance to the German invasion, a gesture that underscores the notebook’s utility and its physical presence in the world as his testament which he could choose to store in the hiding nook that, we’re told, a single member of his family could use to hide from searches. The Ansky sequence of *2666* doesn’t reach its completion until Reiter has a nightmare in which he escapes from a Soviet attack by magically floating down the Dnieper to the Black Sea only to realize that Ansky’s notebook is destroyed in the process. It’s his horror at this outcome that finally drives him to leave the cottage and the village but not before carefully returning the notebook to its hiding spot while hoping that somebody else finds it. Ansky’s book, Reiter clearly believes, is not his to publish or even to keep. Like the other experiences of intense human connection through reading we’ve explored throughout *2666*, this one is non-transferable and more about the happy conjunction of one reader and one writer than about the wide appeal of a certain kind of writing. And that ability to be truly moved by writing that includes everything (again, “todo dentro de todo”) has to do with a particular match in experience: unraveling Amalfitano is receptive to this kind of messy, ambitious fiction while the

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<sup>53</sup> It’s worth noting that the young Hans Reiter’s other favorite work of literature is a story of a knight errant: Wolfram von Eschenbach’s *Parzival*. See Chapter 3 for more.

<sup>54</sup> Amalfitano also uses the figure of the theater to structure a harangue about the cynical opportunism of Mexican intellectuals that he regales the Archimboldian critics with upon their arrival in Mexico, cf. 160-4. The critics don’t know what to do with his speech.



young men he criticizes are not; the young Pelletier could be moved by Archimboldi, but it's not until he breathes the evil air of Santa Teresa that it truly brings him up short.

Not long after his run-in with the old man, when she finds out about the *nom de plume* Benno von Archimboldi, Reiter's lover Ingeborg interprets his assumption of the name as proof that he's sure he will achieve fame through publication. This prompts the fledgling writer to reflect on fame, literature, and what certain individuals mean to him:

Hasta ese momento Archimboldi nunca había pensado en la fama. Hitler era famoso. Goering era famoso. La gente que él amaba o que recordaba con nostalgia no era famosa, sino que cubría ciertas necesidades. Döblin era su consuelo. Ansky era su fuerza. Ingeborg era su alegría. El desaparecido Hugo Halder era la levedad de su vida. Su hermana, de la que no sabía nada, era su propia inocencia. Por supuesto, también eran otras cosas. Incluso, a veces, eran todas las cosas juntas, pero no la fama, que cuando no se cimentaba en el arribismo, lo hacía en el equívoco y en la mentira. Además, la fama era reductora. Todo lo que iba a parar en la fama y todo lo que procedía de la fama inevitablemente se reducía. Los mensajes de la fama eran primarios. La fama y la literatura eran enemigas irreconciliables. (1003)<sup>55</sup>

On one level, Arcimboldi's reflection is yet another testament to the power of the written word to forge meaningful bonds for individuals. Ingeborg, with whom he often discusses books (969), is the only one who's truly present in his life, but he only knows Alfred Döblin and Ansky through their writings, while Hugo Halder, who was the young Reiter's first friend and the man who first introduced him to literature, and his little sister Lotte, whose letters he memorized during the war, have long since vanished from his life.

It's also an excellent encapsulation of how personal Arcimboldi's manner of thinking truly is. The ideal of fame is tarnished for him because it's associated with the likes of Hitler and Goering, while it's opposite, anonymity, is valuable because he can attach it to those people who truly matter to him. All of his emotional requirements and all of the virtues he aspires to, in fact, are embodied by the members of his inner circle (give or take a well-known writer), and thus he clearly doesn't need to look for community or a sense of belonging in, say, the myth of the Fatherland.

It also means that he has no need to achieve the kind of worldly success that would ensure him a mass of admiring readers, a mass that, both the rest of his section and "The Part about the Critics" make clear, never quite materializes, due to the nature of the work he publishes. As the various acts of reading we've examined throughout this chapter have shown, in *2666* life-altering literature is disturbing rather than entertaining, and it is written not to please an audience but rather to confront a chaotic world. By this point, with Arcimboldi's war experience, his first *vagabundeo*, over and a sustaining inner circle of individuals complete, *2666* has reached a zenith of intensity that it slowly descends from. Narrative "intensity" might sound like a vague concept but there are two rough indices that we can use to track its decline in the novel

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<sup>55</sup> "Until that moment Archimboldi had never thought about fame. Hitler was famous. Göring was famous. The people he loved or remembered fondly weren't famous, they just satisfied certain needs. Döblin was his consolation. Ansky was his strength. Ingeborg was his joy. The disappeared Hugu Halder was lightheartedness and fun. His sister, about whom he had no news, was his own innocence. Of course, they were other things too. Sometimes they were even everything all together, but not fame, which was rooted in delusion and lies, if not ambition. Also, fame was reductive. Everything that ended in fame and everything that issued from fame was inevitably diminished. Fame's message was unadorned. Fame and literature were irreconcilable enemies." (801-2)

from 1945 on: first, far fewer pages are expended to describe the many years of his postwar experiences, and second, no one meaningfully new enters his life, with the signal exception of Herr Bubis, his patron and protector (and a walking repository of prewar German literary culture). Arcimboldi was always more of a witness than an actor and more of a listener and reader than speaker or writer, but after his decision to write is fully assumed, he never again really gets to affirm anything on his own, the way he did on the subjects of *apariencia* and fame. Having been given an account of who Hans Reiter was, we now go back to relating to him as the obscure Benno von Arcimboldi, author of mysterious novels (whose actual writing is dispatched at a brisk clip). He remains true to the individualistic ideals we've heard him express—he lives an itinerant life throughout Southern Europe and retains ties only to Bubis and his wife, rather than to any institution.

### Lotte Reiter's Claim

The novel doesn't peter out completely, however. With what feels like an acknowledgment that *2666* has been a compendium of life stories all along, the novel turns its attention to Arcimboldi's little sister: "Y llegamos, finalmente, a la hermana de Arcimboldi, Lotte Reiter" (1082).<sup>56</sup> This announcement that Lotte will represent some kind of end turns out to be disingenuous in a couple of different ways. To understand why, I'd like to read her coda in light of a couple of earlier moments in the novel.

Though Lotte has been announced as the focus of this final sequence, her narrative is dominated by her relationships to the two key men in her life: first her brother Hans and later her son Klaus Haas. The freakishly tall and pale Klaus has, of course, already wandered into *2666*. He is the terrifying German giant whose appearance in a Santa Teresa prison for an interview with the journalists Oscar Fate and Guadalupe Roncal is both the high mark of the novel's supernatural horror storytelling and the point that cracks the novel in half: instead of an account of that interview, which would have presumably cleared up his identity and confirmed that he is not responsible for the femicides, the novel instead cuts off, only to begin again with the first of the forensic descriptions of a discovered body that will structure "The Part about the Crimes." Part of what makes Klaus's entrance in that moment stand out is that his aura of fantastic menace isn't merely external—as in moments we've examined before, the weather of Santa Teresa plays its part ("pasaron las nubes negras que venían del este por encima del penal y el aire pareció oscurecerse"<sup>57</sup>)—but also self-created: the "giant" sings about being "a giant lost in a burned wood" and about the even greater giant who will come and avenge him (439). In "Crimes," Haas is, to borrow the critic Adam Kirsch's concise formulation, "one of the characters who looms into individuality out of the anonymous crowd of the dead." As happens on a larger scale with his uncle Hans, the more we learn about his story, his mythic grandeur is slowly replaced by, if not banality—he turns out to be an exceptionally ruthless and manipulative prisoner, who bends his fellow inmates and lawyer to his will<sup>58</sup>—at least a certain degree of verisimilitude.

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<sup>56</sup> "And at last we come to Archimboldi's sister, Lotte Reiter." (864)

Note the difference in their names: Hans is now irrevocably Archimboldi, Lotte remains a Reiter. They are referred to by these names throughout the entire last sequence, even though Lotte doesn't learn that Hans goes by Archimboldi until relatively late.

<sup>57</sup> "the black clouds from the east passed over the prison and the sky seemed to darken." (349)

<sup>58</sup> Kirsch nicely captures the full extent of Haas's malevolence, the way he appears to be "if not an anti-Christ, at least a sign of the times: a beast whose advent signals a cosmic realignment" by pointing out how he's indirectly compared to that emblem of modern apocalyptic worry: Yeats's "rough beast" from "The Second Coming." I don't

Haas's sense of himself and his uncle as giants, we learn in "Arcimboldi," comes straight from his mother Lotte. This is what she writes to her brother during the war:

Tus pasos resuenan en el bosque, decía Lotte en sus cartas. Los pájaros del bosque oyen el sonido de tus pisadas y dejan de cantar. Los que están trabajando en el campo te oyen. Los que están ocultos en habitaciones oscuras te oyen. Los jóvenes de las Juventudes Hitlerianas te oyen y acuden a esperarte a la entrada del pueblo. Todo es alegría. Estás vivo. Alemania está viva. Etcétera. (925)<sup>59</sup>

Though she never expresses the belief that her brother embodies her homeland in quite this way again, Lotte's section is filled with her sense of wonder at his enormity and her belief that he's more than just an individual. Most of those she encounters, from the retreating soldiers who tell her various conflicting tales about her brother's fate to the citizens who gather to listen to the news of Hitler's death on the radio, are described as mere *sombras*, shadows, beings without full corporeal existence. It is an article of faith for her, however, that her giant brother cannot die.

Despite Lotte's belief in him, Archimboldi abandons her completely, and this gives a pathetic undertone to her story and to the subsequent story of her son Klaus, who himself abandons her by lighting out for North America. It's while traveling to Mexico to visit Klaus once he's gotten himself locked up in Santa Teresa that Lotte happens to pick up a novel of Archimboldi's, precisely the novel in which he recounts his and his sister's Prussian childhood. Lotte tracks him down through his publisher and when he finally shows up at her door, after more than half a century of neglect, they have a nightlong conversation that ends with her lamenting her son's imprisonment and her sense that he has no one to remember him and beseeching her brother to help: "¿Tú te ocuparás de todo?"<sup>60</sup> she asks, but we never get Archimboldi's reply. Instead, we get the curious story of Fürst Pückler<sup>61</sup> and the confirmation—in the novel's very last line—that Archimboldi is off to Mexico to save his nephew.

By ending with this extended coda, *2666* manages to add the life stories of Lotte and Klaus to its collection and to explain just what it is that brings Archimboldi to Santa Teresa, thus finally bringing together, at least at the basic level of plot, the man and the city that have served as the novel's primary foci. Because it adopts the point of view of Archimboldi's abandoned, and perennially awe-struck, little sister this sequence also returns an aura of unreality and mystery to a character that we'd come to know rather well over the previous couple of hundred pages and whose aura had largely dissipated. And precisely by giving us this different perspective on him, it reminds us not to think of him as simply heroic. Archimboldi's love for his sister is surely, as

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deny that those signifiers attach to him, but he's never quite as inscrutable and portentous as when he's merely the unnamed "giant" of the end of "Fate."

<sup>59</sup> "Your steps echo in the forest, said Lotte in her letters. The birds of the forest hear the sound of your footsteps and stop singing. The workers in the fields hear you. The people hidden in dark rooms hear you. The Hitler Youth hear you and come out to wait for you on the road into town. Everything is happiness. You're alive. Germany is alive. et cetera." (740-1)

This précis of Lotte's correspondence is cited during the narration of Reiter's hiatus from Ansky's village and is described as one of his main sources of solace, as that which leads him to smile as he drifts off to sleep. It also comes right before his reflections on *apariencia*, wherein he denounces Nazism as "el reino absoluto de la apariencia," and asserts that "mi amor por Lotte no es apariencia. Lotte es mi hermana y es pequeña y cree que soy un gigante" (926). (National Socialism was the ultimate realm of semblance. . . My love for Lotte isn't semblance, Lotte is my sister and she's little and she thinks I'm a giant. (741))

<sup>60</sup> "Will you take care of it all?" (891)

<sup>61</sup> For an extended reading of the Fürst Pückler ending, please see Chapter 3 on the role of factual trivia in the novel.

he claims, true and free of *apariencia*, but so is his complete abandonment of her and of their family.

*2666* is far from a sentimental brief in favor of the traditional family or conventional morality but, as I hope this chapter has shown, both the narratives it tells and its narrative form evince a great deal of concern with who counts for us as individual in a moral sense, who has a claim on our attention and care. Structured the way it is, around the wanderings or pursuits of certain deeply unsocial individuals rather than around any already established communities, it makes communal belonging conspicuous by its absence. At the same time, the grim but recognizable picture of the world that it constructs allows us to understand why so many of its characters choose to devote themselves to solitary tasks such as reading and writing rather than to engage with the corrupt institutions and societies that have so little to offer them.

Nevertheless, by representing instances of meaningful connection and care, *2666* makes it clear that we cannot just take the Marco Antonio Guerra route and withdraw completely into an inner citadel that contains stockpiles of culture. Even after a lifetime of neglect, Archimboldi chooses to answer Lotte's call for help. Whether his rescue attempt is successful, whether it's even really worthwhile—Klaus isn't exactly the resident of Santa Teresa most deserving of help (one of the frustrating aspects of the crimes that I will describe in the next chapter is that a few of the victims have irrepressible searchers or avengers while most seem to have no one)—is left a mystery, but *that* it's undertaken does matter, as does the fact that it's the last decision represented in the book.

By way of closing, I offer a brief note on the book's length. Because it tells so many stories about so many different people, and because it does so from the often limited or distorting points of views of strangers (or, as here, long-lost relatives), *2666* forces us as readers to live with our ignorance of various kinds of others in a way that a shorter or more focused fiction could not do. It overwhelms us, frustrates us, and lives up to the programmatic declarations made by its characters in favor of a literature that refuses to reduce the world to an easily manageable shape. Because this chapter focuses on the stories of a group of flawed and embattled but ultimately sympathetic and sometimes even heroic men of letters it might seem like literature plays a central, salvific role in the world of the novel. In order to see why this might be less true than my account up to now suggests, I now turn to the dark heart of *2666*: the crimes against the women of Santa Teresa.

## Chapter 2: Women in the Shapes of Monsters

A woman in the shape of a monster  
 a monster in the shape of a woman  
 the skies are full of them...

I have been standing all my life in the  
 direct path of a battery of signals  
 the most accurately transmitted most  
 untranslatable language in the universe  
 I am a galactic cloud so deep so invo-  
 luted that a light wave could take 15  
 years to travel through me And has  
 taken I am an instrument in the shape  
 of a woman trying to translate pulsations  
 into images for the relief of the body  
 and the reconstruction of the mind.

-Adrienne Rich, "Planetarium"

### The Ghost of Valerie Solanas

For a book centrally concerned with violence against women and whose characters compulsively pay tribute to the writers and thinkers that most matter to them, *2666* is conspicuously bereft of the names of feminists. There is one notable exception, and it comes at that singularly unnerving moment roughly halfway through Part 1: the assault on the Pakistani taxi driver. The Archiboldi critics Manuel Espinoza and Jean-Claude Pelletier have dragged a Pakistani taxi driver out of his vehicle and are beating him, ferociously. The cabbie has insulted them and, more importantly, he's called their fellow critic and mutual lover Liz Norton a whore. As they intensify their assault, Espinoza and Pelletier begin to frame their personal rage as political by invoking people whom they assume their victim hates: first Salman Rushdie, "an author," we're told parenthetically, "whom both consider to be pretty bad, but whose mention seemed pertinent"<sup>62</sup> and then, several women:

esta patada es de parte de las feministas de París (parad de una puta vez, les gritaba Norton), esta patada es de parte de las feministas de Nueva York (lo vais a matar, les gritaba Norton), esta patada es de parte del fantasma de Valerie Solanas, hijo de mala

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<sup>62</sup> For more on Bolaño's conception of literary criticism as blood sport see any of the criticism that he published under his own name. In particular, see virtually any of his reviews of writers who achieved international fame on the scale of Rushdie's.

madre, y así, hasta dejarlo inconsciente y sangrando por todos los orificios de la cabeza, menos por los ojos. (103)<sup>63</sup>

Though there's plenty to be said about the critics' disavowal of their own xenophobia and class privilege—as we saw in Chapter 1, *2666* opens with the college-age Pelletier's resolution to permanently separate himself from the laboring masses that so disgust him—I want to focus on their conviction that their assault constitutes a righteous feminist act. On one level, their invocation of the ghost of Valerie Solanas makes perfect sense. Solanas's story would fit seamlessly within the pages of *2666*: her gleefully incendiary *SCUM Manifesto*<sup>64</sup> contains the same mixture of brazen provocation and urgency as *2666*'s best rants and her shooting of Andy Warhol and subsequent imprisonment and institutionalization also fit in with the novel's interest in fame (or the rejection thereof), madness, and cult figures who stand in the shadows of those recognized as great artists. As Avital Ronell puts it, in her introduction to a recent edition of the *SCUM Manifesto*, “on the level of philosophical complicities or networks, Valerie Solanas was a loner...One thinks of the petitions and complaints of the solitary ranters for whom missives and missiles collapse into an indissociable, deadly mission” (9). Ronell is placing Solanas in a U.S. context by comparing her to the Unabomber and (rather oddly, given the following he amassed) to David Koresh, but these lines could well apply to the many characters in *2666* who, to borrow more of Ronell's words, “vagabond, unmoored and alone with their inscriptions, [offer] a spare cluster of more de-institutionalized and depopulated ‘revolutionaries’” (9).

The invocation of Solanas is also, of course, preposterous. The notion of a couple of bourgeois white academics assaulting an immigrant cab driver in order to defend their woman's honor reads like a parodic vignette straight out of the *SCUM Manifesto*, concrete proof that the male sex should indeed be destroyed. In this chapter I will examine the antinomies of *2666*'s macho feminist project. I want to explore how the novel's oft-recurring, violently masculinist rhetoric—recall Amalfitano's notion of great books as instances of “great combat” waged “amid blood and mortal wounds and stench” or refer to just about any of the speeches of the novel's many rebarbative loners—and general lack of interest in telling stories in which women have much of a sense of agency, sit cheek by jowl with its exhaustive and affecting depiction of misogynistic violence. Had a woman like Valerie Solanas made it into *2666* through more than a name-check she would have been one of the only women in a character system overwhelmingly dominated by men. For a novel famously centered on a horrific series of crimes against women, it contains very few women in central roles. Amalfitano, Fate, Archimboldi: each of the characters given a novel-length part of the whole is a man and even Liz Norton in “The Part About the Critics” and the women whose stories are threaded throughout “The Part About the Crimes” are present largely in supporting roles. Yet Solanas would have found much to applaud as well. As we saw in Chapter 1, the novel is bookended by two accounts of masculine failure: on the front end, the shattering of Pelletier and Espinoza's senses of mastery, not only over Archimboldi's work but over Liz Norton as well, and, as a coda, the brief but powerful account of Lotte Reiter's neglect by her brother. And at its very center is the prodigious “Part About the Crimes,” during which the sequence of dramas of beset intellectual manhood is suspended in

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<sup>63</sup> “this [kick] is for the feminists of Paris (will you fucking stop, Norton was shouting), this one is for the feminists of New York (you're going to kill him, shouted Norton), this one is for the ghost of Valerie Solanas, you son of a bitch, and on and on, until he was unconscious and bleeding from every orifice in the head, except the eyes.” (74)

<sup>64</sup> SCUM stands for Society for Cutting Up Men. It also signals Solanas's complete rejection of the kind of purity that Espinoza and Pelletier seem to want to claim for themselves by taking her name.

order to make way for all those dead young women's bodies, yes, but also for the stories of a diverse group of women either striving to solve one or more of the murders or struggling to stay alive in the hellscape of Santa Teresa. I begin with Pelletier and Espinoza's invocation of Solanas, in short, because Bolaño, like them, exhibits an intuitive affinity for a radical critique of masculinist violence at the very same time that he reproduces that violence on the page.

In Chapter 1, I argued that *2666* is defined by the conflict between the idea that it ought to afford equal respect to each of its characters and the sense that some mysterious, deeper-than-social difference separates great from ordinary people. In this chapter, I focus on how the novel's idiosyncratic framing of this problematic of equality intersects with that savage engine of inequality, the patriarchal gender system. While this chapter also advances through a survey of encounters between individual characters, it differs from the first in that its focus is on what these encounters tell us about these specific questions of gendered subordination, i.e. the characters I examine here aren't worried about whether they're worthless for some unfathomable metaphysical reason, instead, they're aware, to different degrees, that they're lower on a hierarchy because they are women.

But just as in the Nietzschean conjectures of the old writer in Cologne, a kind of all-or-nothing logic obtains. Valerie Solanas looks upon a world where men dominate and destroy women and sees proof of deep female superiority: "Just as humans have a prior right to existence over dogs by virtue of being more highly evolved and having a superior consciousness, so women have a prior right to existence over men. The elimination of any male is, therefore, a righteous and good act, an act highly beneficial to women as well as an act of mercy" (67). After reading the compendium of macho flailing and aggression that is *2666*, one might well agree with Solanas that what the world needs most is the elimination of those who behave as males (not all of whom, it's important to note, are "biologically" male). In the following I attempt to map how radically Solanas-esque Bolaño's final novel becomes even as it can't shed its author's masculinist conception of opposition.

This central tension in the novel's feminist critique is best captured in its recourse to equivocal images of monstrosity. Unlike the novel's male protagonists—with the crucial exception of Archiboldi—the women who come to dominate the middle of *2666* all have moments in which they appear to stand outside the normal order of things. And in each case, and much like in Adrienne Rich's "Planetarium," the access to a reality beyond ordinary reality that these women possess reads like a consequence of an eons-long process of being treated as some kind of monster. And while all the women we'll spend time with share an experience of misogyny, not all of them reach the cosmic attunement of Rich's speaker, who aspires to translate the pulsations of her sister monsters "for the relief of the body / and the reconstruction of the mind." Throughout this chapter, we'll see the different lives that are made available to a group of women surviving under almost unbearable pressure. What a novel this long and variously peopled makes possible is a consideration of a variety of possibilities that doesn't make any one fate appear determinate. At the same time, the novel, and "The Part About the Crimes" in particular, demonstrates the exigency of living not only as a potential victim of gendered violence but with an awareness of the toll that violence is taking on the women around one. Unlike the men we spent time with in Chapter 1, the women we'll examine here are moved to at least contemplate a kind of action for change. And because this is the section of the novel that's centered on a place rather than on an individual's voyage, this chapter raises the question of political organization more often than the others. One thing we'll examine as we spend time with these different women who all want to fight the same epidemic of violence is why they can't

come together to do anything about it, why their various trajectories seem like they're on the verge of intersecting only to veer off in some direction or other and vanish in anticlimactic narrative "deaths."

Before turning to the three women whose stories anchor much of "Crimes," I will read the very different cases of Liz Norton and Cesárea Tinajero, both of which prefigure the ways in which the later stories are told and which represent two very different paths to reacting to the horror of the femicides.

### Liz Norton: The Medusa Withdraws

Liz Norton's case feels especially instructive insofar as it demonstrates how Bolaño's female characters very seldom fit into the categories of seeker or oracle. She paradoxically seems to possess both more and less complexity or characterological depth than her fellow Archimboldians in "The Part About the Critics." She is introduced as the fourth of the four scholars in a passage that eschews the biographical anecdotes that showed, rather than told, us what Pelletier, Morini, and Espinoza are like for disarming expository clarity. It begins by distinguishing her from her colleagues, noting that while the three of them "possessed an iron will,"

Liz Norton, por el contrario, no era lo que comúnmente se llama una mujer con una gran voluntad, es decir no se trazaba planes a medio o largo plazo ni ponía en juego todas sus energías para conseguirlos. Estaba exenta de los atributos de la voluntad. Cuando sufría el dolor fácilmente se traslucía y cuando era feliz la felicidad que experimentaba se volvía contagiosa. (21)<sup>65</sup>

We're also informed that Norton refuses to think in terms of "ends" in general—"A 'lograr un fin' anteponeía la palabra 'vivir' y en raras ocasiones la palabra 'felicidad'"<sup>66</sup>—and concludes by defining her relationship to literature: "Para ella la lectura estaba relacionada directamente con el placer y no directamente con el conocimiento o con los enigmas o con las construcciones y laberintos verbales, como creían Morini, Espinoza y Pelletier" (22).<sup>67</sup>

Whether intentional or not, this confident introduction of *2666*'s first woman character reads like a parody of traditional gender expectations. Passive, intuitive, and indulgent rather than willful, intellectual, and exacting in her approach to her literary vocation, Norton is exactly the kind of pliant helpmeet that her colleagues might dream up. And while she is consistently invoked as an equal part of this small Archimboldian school, the impression we get of her and of the role that she plays in the group is clearly the one held by her male peers.<sup>68</sup> She is both within

<sup>65</sup> "Liz Norton, on the other hand, wasn't what one would ordinarily call a woman of great drive, which is to say that she didn't draw up long- or medium-term plans and throw herself wholeheartedly into their execution. She had none of the attributes of the willful. When she suffered, her pain was clearly visible, and when she was happy, the happiness she felt was contagious." (8; translation modified)

<sup>66</sup> "Used in a personal sense, the phrase 'achieve an end' seemed to her a small-minded snare. She preferred the word *life*, and, on rare occasions, *happiness*." (8)

<sup>67</sup> "For her reading was directly linked to pleasure, not to knowledge or enigmas or constructions or verbal labyrinths, as Morini, Espinoza, and Pelletier believed it to be." (9)

<sup>68</sup> The poet Olvido García Valdés had this to say about the group of *infrarrealistas* that Bolaño and Mario Santiago headed in the Mexico City of the seventies: "Compartíamos en gran medida, claro, el mundo de procedencia—la pasión de la poesía, el choque con el mundo, real y literario (allá y acá), en el que deberíamos habernos insertado—, el rechazo frontal ante ese mundo. Pero su mirada y su posición en el núcleo de lo colectivo—la *pandilla* con sus múltiples ramificaciones, prehistorias y estratos—era *naturalmente* masculina." (*Archivo Bolaño*, 116)



and without the critics' group. This becomes clear just a few pages later in the moment when the group consolidates itself as a school by cutting a swath through its rivals (at least in its own mind). At that moment, Norton is described as an avenging angel, "a Desaix, a Lannes, a blond Amazon who spoke excellent German" (27). Whether a transparently intuitive naïve or a redoubtable warrior, Norton is presented as already-formed, more fit for the role of muse than the subject of a Bildungsroman (however shallow and parodic that *Bildung* might be).

In short, Norton is removed from the ranks of obsessives and seekers as soon as she appears. The men in her life become obsessed with solving the mysteries of Archimboldi's novels and whereabouts while she appears at the margins of their stories. Having been presented in such stark relief early on she becomes a shadowy, mysterious figure and remains such until the moment at the very end of the section when her long email allows us to hear her give an account of herself in her own voice. Long before that, though, the guileless and charming figure sketched out here is transformed into something inscrutable and menacing in the minds of her jealous lovers Pelletier and Espinoza, a transformation that sets off a chain of events that culminates in the near-deadly beating of the Pakistani cab driver.

For the duration of this sequence, "The Part about the Critics," which normally jumps back and forth across Europe from page to page, settles on the increasingly unreal city of London. It begins when Norton invites her two lovers to England and tells them that what would be most appropriate would be for the three of them to sleep together (84). The two men's inability to discern whether or not she's made this proposal in jest wakes them up in the middle of the night and drives them to seek out the books available in her apartment: "Pelletier abrió un libro sobre la obra de Berthe Morisot, la primera mujer que perteneció al grupo impresionista, pero al cabo de un rato le dieron ganas de estrellarlo contra la pared"<sup>69</sup> (86). Both men flee the apartment and take their barely contained rage with them. During his flight back to Paris, Pelletier asks himself a series of questions—among them why he wanted to destroy the Morisot book when it was a gift he'd given to Norton by a painter he admires—that suggest that he's quite aware of the displaced nature of his anger: "¿por qué pensaba en Berthe Morisot y en el libro y en la nuca de Norton y no en la posibilidad cierta de un *ménage à trois* que aquella noche había levitado como un brujo indio aullador en el piso de la inglesa sin llegar a materializarse jamás?"<sup>70</sup> (87). Why, indeed, is he thinking about Berthe Morisot? His fixation on this particular painter, the sole woman in her own group, suggests an intuition just below the reach of Pelletier's consciousness about Norton's own status as an interloper or a token.

It's right after this moment that Pelletier and Espinoza are given the opportunity to condense their anxieties about Norton into the figure of Medusa. This transformation differs from the other notable instances of mythopoeisis in the novel insofar as it takes a character who has already been quite carefully defined for us (recall the clarity of that introductory passage on her lack of will and indifference to mystery) and turns her into a mythical monster. We spend hundreds of pages hearing Klaus Haas and his uncle Archimboldi described as chthonic giants before we're made privy to their relatively banal origins. Liz Norton, however, is deified and vilified by the men in her life in quite short order, all thanks to Alex Pritchard, a menacing young Englishman with spiderish hands whom our two increasingly jealous Archimboldians discover in

<sup>69</sup> "Pelletier opened a book on the work of Berthe Morisot, the first woman impressionist, but soon he felt like hurling it against the wall." (60)

<sup>70</sup> "Why was he thinking about Berthe Morisot and the book and the back of Norton's neck and not about the real possibility of a *ménage à trois* that had hovered in Norton's apartment that night like a howling Indian witch doctor without ever materializing?" (61; translation modified)

her apartment one night. The quartet share an absurdly tense evening that almost comes to blows,<sup>71</sup> but, despite the scorn that Pelletier and Espinoza heap upon him, they take his warning to Pelletier to “beware the Medusa” in all seriousness (97). Rather than telling Norton about Pritchard’s cryptic message, Pelletier takes it to Espinoza and the two men interpret it at length. They agree that the key questions raised by the myth are two: whether Norton needs to die for them to find true love just as Pegasus was born from the dead Medusa and whether Pritchard is casting himself in the role of Perseus. This may sound absurd in quick paraphrase but it’s menacing on the page where the names of Gorgons and their brood listed by Pelletier partake in the general atmosphere of supernatural horror that Bolaño’s been building throughout this sequence.

The illocutionary force of Pritchard’s warning proves to be, quite literally, astonishing. Convinced that the myth of the Medusa is directly relevant to their lives, Pelletier and Espinoza go about their academic routines “like sleepwalkers” or “drugged detectives” (98). It’s in this state that they get in the Pakistani driver’s cab and proceed to beat him half to death, ostensibly in the name of radical feminism. That beating is identified, quite explicitly, with the consummation that the critics had been longing for: “Era como si, por fin, hubieran hecho el *ménage à trois* con el que tanto habían fantaseado”<sup>72</sup> (103). In a detail that speaks volumes about how far Bolaño wants to push his equation of sex and death, Norton, who tried to stop the assault from happening from the beginning, “seemed to have experienced multiple orgasms” (103). The victim in this case happens to be a man, but the elements of this violent action—a complete abandonment of restraint spurred by a fit of erotomania and the lashing out of men who feel compelled to defend a woman they take to be theirs—recur throughout the larger novel.

I’d like to linger on the latter point because it’s the more relevant to how Pelletier and Espinoza choose to rationalize what they did. In conversation the next day, the two men cast themselves as Medusa’s protectors rather than her victims: “Recapitularon, cada vez con menor énfasis, la concatenación de hechos que los arrastraron a pegarle, finalmente, al taxista. Pritchard, sin duda. Y la Gorgona, esa Medusa inocente y mortal, segregada del resto de sus hermanas inmortales. Y la amenaza velada o no tan velada. Y los nervios. Y la ofensa de aquel patán tan ignorante”<sup>73</sup> (105). By their own account, it was their intense fear of Perseus and not of Medusa that caused Pelletier and Espinoza to lash out. This gibes with their proclamations during the beating that they were bashing back against the kind of man who sees a liberated woman like Norton (or Valerie Solanas) as a Medusa-like castrating threat.

Of course, when they finally take their fears to Norton herself, her attempts to get them to abandon their belief that she’s in mortal danger fall on wholly deaf ears:

le dijeron todo lo que sabían o temían de Pritchard. La Gorgona, la muerte de la Gorgona. La mujer que explota. Ella los dejó hablar hasta que se les acabaron las palabras. Luego

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<sup>71</sup> The very real threat of violence which courses through that scene is partially undermined when Espinoza decides to insult Pritchard with the incredibly recherché Spanish epithet *badulaque*, a word out of Covarrubias that the Spaniard defines with considerable exactitude (93). As with the dig at Salman Rushdie that he works into the beating of the cab driver, Bolaño tempers the violence in this section with a dark, bookish humor that is largely absent from the horrors of “The Part About the Crimes.”

<sup>72</sup> “It was as if they’d finally had the *ménage à trois* they’d so often dreamed of” (74).

<sup>73</sup> “More calmly each time, they went over and over the concatenation of events that had driven them, finally, to give the cabbie a beating. Pritchard, no question about it. And the Gorgon, that innocent and mortal Medusa, set apart from her immortal sisters. And the veiled or not so veiled threat. And nerves. And the rudeness of that ignorant wretch.” (76)

los tranquilizó. Pritchard era incapaz de matar una mosca, les dijo. Ellos pensaron en Anthony Perkins, que aseguraba ser incapaz de hacerle daño a una mosca y luego pasó lo que pasó, pero prefirieron no discutir y aceptaron, sin convencimiento, sus argumentos. Después Norton se sentó y les dijo que lo que no tenía explicación era lo que había pasado la noche anterior (105-6).<sup>74</sup>

For Norton, who knows that Pritchard poses no threat, the story of the Medusa doesn't suffice. To Pelletier and Espinoza, however, she's Janet Leigh, walking obliviously to her death. For them, it's always another man who's the essentially violent one and despite what they've just done the real violence lies in the future.

This belief is then codified in a late-night phone call the two men share after Norton tells them that they should stop seeing each other while she takes some time to think about what's happened. Espinoza wonders whether what he did doesn't "reveal what he truly was, a xenophobic and violent right-winger," while Pelletier is more bothered by how "unsportsmanlike" it was for him to kick the Pakistani while he was down. Then, in a remarkable sentence that concludes the sequence, the narrator makes it perfectly clear how shallow their remorse and self-criticism truly are:

Se expusieron sus respectivas aprensiones. Procedieron a reconfortarse. Pero al cabo de pocos minutos volvieron a lamentar el incidente, por más que en su fuero íntimo estuvieron convencidos de que el verdadero derechista y misógino era el paquistaní, de que el violento era el paquistaní, de que el intolerante y mal educado era el paquistaní, de que el que se lo había buscado era el paquistaní, una y mil veces. En estas ocasiones, la verdad, si el taxista se hubiera materializado ante ellos, seguramente lo habrían matado. (110)<sup>75</sup>

Deep in their hearts these men know that they can't possibly be reactionary, xenophobic misogynists. Unlike the ignorant brown man they nearly kill, or the psychopathic creep who threatens their woman, they're enlightened, they know what those labels mean, and they deeply resent the possibility that they might apply to them. By the end of their section of the book they will be cut adrift in Santa Teresa and Norton will have rejected them for Morini. If there's one thing in "The Part about the Critics" that isn't ironized, it's the critics' devotion to and knowledge of art and culture. But that doesn't keep them from behaving brutally when "their" woman is insulted.

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<sup>74</sup> "they told her everything they knew or feared about Pritchard. The Gorgon, the death of the Gorgon. The exploding woman. She let them talk until they ran out of words. Then she soothed them. Pritchard couldn't hurt a fly she said. They thought of Anthony Perkins, who claimed he wouldn't hurt a fly and look what happened, but they were content not to argue and they accepted her arguments, unconvinced. Then Norton sat down and said that the thing that couldn't be explained was what had happened the night before." (76)

<sup>75</sup> "They expressed their respective fears. They comforted each other. But after a few minutes they were again lamenting what had happened, even though deep down inside they were convinced that it was the Pakistani who was the real reactionary and misogynist, the violent one, the intolerant and offensive one, that the Pakistani had asked for it a thousand times over. The truth is that at moments like these, if the Pakistani had materialized before them, they probably would have killed him." (80)

Which isn't to suggest that Liz Norton's story is merely an occasion for Bolaño to unmask Pelletier and Espinoza's hypocrisy and misogyny. The emails she sends the two of them when she leaves them in Santa Teresa, and which offend them insofar as they're largely the same, contain a truly ambiguous combination of tenderness and empathy on the one hand and a recoil and withdrawal to that which makes her feel the most secure. She opens by noting that the "horrible city" had spurred her to truly "think": "Pensar en un sentido estricto, por primera vez desde hace años. Es decir: se había puesto a pensar en cosas prácticas, reales, tangibles, y también se había puesto a recordar" (187).<sup>76</sup> Specifically, she ends up contrasting the disgust she feels upon learning that a distinguished intellectual could be nicknamed "el Cerdo" with a rosy memory of a grade-school classmate of hers she insisted on calling "Jimmy" instead of James (ibid.). In walking her former lovers through the transformation that visiting Santa Teresa had wrought in her, Norton is careful to not just romanticize Europe at the expense of Mexico. She tells them about suffering a panic attack and wanting to give up all her possessions to live the life of a "vagabond," only to inform them that she's exactly aware of the kind of violence that homeless women face in England (192). What ends up pulling her out of her despair is a chance encounter with the art of Edwin Johns, the mad, self-mutilating painter whom Morini had been so taken with. This prompts her to visit Morini in Turin and the two of them, despite obsessively discussing topics that she herself recognizes as "depressing,"—Johns's death in a fall from a Swiss alp, "la derecha en Italia, del rebrote del fascismo en Europa, de los inmigrantes, de los terroristas musulmanes, de la política británica y norteamericana" (200)<sup>77</sup>—form a community of two. The email continues for a few more pages that feature the two critics' declarations of love for one another and Norton's sign-off—a message about how neither she nor Morini care how long they'll last as a couple; they love each other now and are happy—but the image of their coalescence that lingers because it includes so many of Bolaño's concerns is this one:

El restaurante estaba en medio de un jardín en donde había bancos y estatuas de piedra. Recuerdo que yo empujaba la silla de Morini y él me enseñaba las estatuas. Algunas eran figuras mitológicas, pero otras representaban simples campesinos perdidos en la noche. En el parque había otras parejas que paseaban y a veces nos cruzábamos con ellas y otras veces sólo veíamos sus sombras. Mientras comíamos Morini me preguntó por vosotros. Le dije que la pista que situaba a Archimboldi en el norte de México era una pista falsa y que probablemente ni siquiera había pisado aquel país. Le conté lo de vuestro amigo mexicano, el gran intelectual llamado el Cerdo, y nos reímos un buen rato. La verdad es que yo cada vez me sentía mejor. (200)<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> "Think in the strict sense, for the first time in years. In other words: she had begun to think about practical, real, tangible things, and she had also begun to remember." (142)

<sup>77</sup> "we talked about the Italian right, about the resurgence of fascism in Europe, about immigrants, about Islamic terrorists, about British and American politics." (153)

<sup>78</sup> "The restaurant was in the middle of a garden where there were benches and stone statues. I remember that I pushed Morini's chair and he showed me the statues. Some were of mythological figures, but others were of simple peasants lost in the night. In the park there were other couples strolling and sometimes we crossed paths with them and other times we only glimpsed their shadows. As we ate Morini asked about the two of you. I told him the tip about Archimboldi being in the north of Mexico was false, and that he'd probably never set foot in the country. I told him about your Mexican friend, the great intellectual El Cerdo, and we laughed for a long time. I really was feeling better and better." (153)

Norton's unwarranted self-assurance in her wrongness about Archiboldi's whereabouts feels like an integral part of the decision that she and Morini are making to opt out of the search that they had once been so interested in. We know from the content of their conversation that they're not abandoning their social consciences as they become a community of two, but their capacity to laugh off their former project feels far from triumphant. Espinoza and Pelletier are undoubtedly horrible, but as we saw in Chapter 1, their failed search for Archiboldi in Santa Teresa accords them a quantum of nobility, if not of redemption. It's hard to begrudge Norton or Morini the happiness they find together, but it's equally hard to miss how it effectively writes them out of the novel. As we'll see with every single one of the women we'll encounter in this chapter, traditional coupledness is not romanticized in Bolaño's fictional world. There is perhaps no clearer indication of the little time Bolaño has for representing ordinary social life in *2666* than the way that the first long section of his novel ends with this most fleeting and ambivalent glimpse of two people attempting to form a life together.

### The Warship Cesárea Tinajero

Before moving to consider the women of "The Part About the Crimes" I want to look at one more of their precursors, this time from Bolaño's other long novel, *Los detectives salvajes*. I'm speaking, of course, of Cesárea Tinajero, the avant-garde Mexico City poet of a previous generation whose hermetic work and romantic story fascinates that novel's central searchers: the teenaged diarist-narrator Juan García Madero, his girlfriend Lupe, and the poets Arturo Belano and Ulises Lima. Viewed from a certain angle, the *2666* analogue for Cesárea is Archiboldi: the vanished cult writer whose legend prompts a group of admirers into a search in the Mexico-U.S. borderlands. In the crucial ways I'll track here, however, her mid-twentieth century story prefigures the fates of the modern-day women living and dying in Santa Teresa.

Near the very end of *Detectives*, with the quartet racked by fear that they will be caught at any moment by Lupe's brutal pimp Alberto, who has tracked them all the way from the D.F. to Santa Teresa, they meet Flora Castañeda, a middle-aged schoolteacher who worked with Cesárea during the latter's stints as a teacher and factory worker. Flora, who only now, forty years later, finds out about her old friend's vocation as a poet, describes a singularly strange, private, and solitary woman who was always reading library books and filling notebooks with a tiny script that "slid like a stampede of insects" (632). As with the autodidacts of *2666*,<sup>79</sup> Cesárea's omnivorous, unsystematic reading coexists with very specific intellectual enthusiasms. The one time Flora asks her what she's writing about, Cesárea names, without explanation, the Alexandrian philosopher Hypatia (*ibid.*). Flora reports to her interviewers that when she looked up Hypatia in the encyclopedia she thinks "perhaps impulsively" that Cesárea identifies with that martyr of learning and eventual feminist icon, inviting us to do the same and to wonder who she might feel persecuted by.

A decade and a half older than her young friend Flora, who's just starting out as a teacher, Cesárea has abandoned the literary milieu of Mexico City for this northern city, where she continues her intellectual exertions while supporting herself as a full-time worker at Santa Teresa's first canning factory. Rosa's account immediately jumps ahead ten years or so and notes that the closing of the canning factory has left Cesárea living in a single room on Rubén Darío Street, living in a state of precarity that shocks both her and her new husband:

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<sup>79</sup> See my discussion of Florita Almada below and of Barry Seaman and the young Hans Reiter in the next chapter.

La calle Rubén Darío por entonces era como la cloaca donde iban a dar todos los desechos de Santa Teresa. Había un par de pulquerías en las cuales, al menos una vez a la semana, se producía un altercado con sangre; los cuartos de las vecindades estaban ocupados por obreros sin empleo o por campesinos recién emigrados a la ciudad; la mayoría de los niños estaban sin escolarizar. Eso la maestra lo sabía porque Cesárea en persona había llevado a algunos cuantos y los había matriculado. (595)<sup>80</sup>

This grim urban picture dates from the forties but no element of it would really need to be updated for it to fit into the 1990s of *2666*. As with the later novel, however, every hint of literary naturalism remains that, merely a hint, and Flora moves on to describe what truly disturbs her: the air of uncanny menace that hangs around her friend's room. The teacher owns how threatening and off-putting she finds Cesárea's neighborhood but insists that the unspecifiable "something" that "emanates from [the room] and weighed on her heart" isn't just poverty or filth, "sino algo más sutil, como si la realidad, en el interior de aquel cuarto perdido, estuviera torcida, o peor aún, como si alguien, Cesárea, ¿quién si no?, hubiera ladeado la realidad imperceptiblemente, con el lento paso de los días. E incluso cabía una opción peor: que Cesárea hubiera torcido la realidad conscientemente" (ibid.).<sup>81</sup> In a move that will recur each time a character encounters a solitary Santa Teresina in *2666*, Cesárea unnerves her old friend by appearing not only unreal but the *source* of the unreality she inhabits.

Rosa's account becomes even more densely detailed as she catalogs each item in Cesárea's room in a move resembling the televisual or filmic forensic survey of a murder scene. Reading backwards from the hundred or so instances of this kind of paragraph that appear in "The Part About the Crimes," we get a sense of how Cesárea prefigures not only the survivors but also the victims of that later novel. As the scene creeps on, we receive confirmation, however, that Flora's fear *of* her friend is greater than her fear *for* her:

cuando le preguntó a Cesárea para qué necesitaba un cuchillo, ésta le contesto que estaba amenazada de muerte y luego se rió, una risa, recuerda la maestra, que traspasó las paredes del cuarto y las escaleras de la casa hasta llegar a la calle, en donde murió. En ese momento a la maestra le pareció que caía sobre la calle Rubén Darío un silencio repentino, perfectamente tramado, el volumen de los radios bajó, el parloteo de los vivos se apagó de pronto y solo quedó la voz de Cesárea. (596)<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> "In those days Calle Rubén Darío was like a sewer where all the dregs of Santa Teresa washed up. There were a couple of pulquerías where at least once a week there was a fight that ended in bloodshed; the tenement rooms were occupied by out-of-work laborers or peasants who had just immigrated to the city; few of the children had any schooling. The teacher knew that because Cesárea herself had brought a few of them over to be enrolled." (632; translation modified)

<sup>81</sup> "something subtler, as if reality were skewered inside that lost room, or even worse, as if over time someone (who but Cesárea?) had imperceptibly turned her back on reality. Or, worst of all, had twisted it on purpose." (633)

<sup>82</sup> "when she asked Cesárea why she needed a knife, Cesárea answered that she was under the threat of death and then she laughed, a laugh, the teacher remembers, that echoed past the walls of the room and the stairs until it reached the street, where it died. At that moment it seemed to the teacher as if a sudden, perfectly orchestrated silence fell over Calle Rubén Darío: radios were turned down, the chatter of the living was suddenly muted, and only Cesárea's voice was left." (633)

To Rosa, “the chatter of the living” is being magically and deliberately muted by Cesárea, who’s somehow not among them. Rubén Darío Street<sup>83</sup> might have struck this young middle-class teacher as terrifying and unfit for a single woman, but it feels mundane compared to the creature she finds in this dark room.

The rest of the encounter between the two women is remarkable for how baldly it denies us the words that could allow us as readers to better understand what might explain Cesárea’s singularity or monstrosity. Flora makes it clear that she listens to words that Cesárea “needs to tell her,” that these words “neither vacillate, nor run into one another,” and that though she’d prefer to forget them, she remembers them perfectly and even understands them (*ibid.*). The young poets listening to Flora’s speech have been looking for Cesárea for much of the novel but there’s not even a hint that they attempt to get the teacher to tell them exactly what she heard that night. Instead, they, and we, just get a detailed description of the most remarkable item in Cesárea’s room: a hand-drawn and extensively annotated blueprint of the canning factory where she used to work. Flora gathers herself together enough to ask Cesárea about it and reports on what she hears in the same frustratingly elliptical way:

Cesárea dijo algo sobre los tiempos que se avecinaban, aunque la maestra suponía que si Cesárea se había entretenido en la confección de aquel plano sin sentido no era por otra razón que por la soledad en que vivía. Pero Cesárea habló de los tiempos que iban a venir y la maestra, por cambiar de tema, le preguntó qué tiempos eran aquellos y cuándo. Y Cesárea apuntó una fecha: allá por el año 2.600. Dos mil seiscientos y pico. Y luego, ante la risa que provocó en la maestra una fecha tan peregrina, risita sofocada que apenas se escuchaba, Cesárea volvió a reírse, aunque esta vez el estruendo de su risa se mantuvo dentro de los límites de su propia habitación. (596-7)<sup>84</sup>

Just what Cesárea says about the future and what it might have to do with the strange factory blueprint is omitted. Instead of a prophecy, we get a moment of demystification, at which Rosa’s wave of fear breaks.

Here in embryo is *2666*’s modal story, the one that recurs at various lengths and intensities throughout the whole novel. An enchanting, strange person gathers an air of sublime mystery, almost always represented as somehow gigantic, around him or herself, only for something to give and for the person they’ve enchanted to regard them as all too human. The vision that Cesárea offers in response to Flora’s question about the factory blueprint, whatever its other particulars, feels silly enough when placed seven centuries into the future that the teacher once again feels herself to be in ordinary surroundings rather than in the lair of some magical being. Thus, the nature of Cesárea’s hand-drawn blueprint is elided. Her project remains as vague as one of Archimboldi’s novels, and like many of those novels it only really bears a single identifying mark, not a title but a date that may or may not be 2666. Given that it’s a blueprint of a canning factory drawn by an avant-garde poet, we can associate it with Russian Futurism or

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<sup>83</sup> The name is both ironic given the filth and squalor of the place it designates and perhaps appropriate to the fantastical creature who appears to live there.

<sup>84</sup> “Cesárea said something about days to come, although the teacher imagined that if Cesárea had spent time on that senseless plan it was simply because she lived such a lonely life. But Cesárea spoke of times to come and the teacher, to change the subject, asked her what times she meant and when they would be. And Cesárea named a date, sometime around the year 2600. Two thousand six hundred and something. And then, when the teacher couldn’t help but laugh at such a random date, a smothered little laugh that could scarcely be heard, Cesárea laughed again, although this time the thunder of her laughter remained within the confines of her own room.” (634)

more broadly with the industrial utopian imagination, but all we know for sure is that to Flora, a comfortable, recently-married young teacher, it feels so far-fetched, literally brought from so far, that it is nothing more than ridiculous. This project on which Cesárea has clearly spent a considerable amount of thought and energy is dismissed by her old friend as the kind of thing a solitary woman could only pursue to occupy her time. A large-scale architectural plan which suggests a mass of people and some collective work or life is read by the teacher as the byproduct of Cesárea's isolation.

The mass-political dimension of Cesárea's solitary labors is confirmed by Flora's revelation that fifteen days after this visit, her friend gave her one her notebooks as a gift. She no longer owns the notebook—her husband “read it and tossed it away”—but she remembers its contents:

básicamente consistía en anotaciones, algunas muy sensatas, otras totalmente fuera de lugar, sobre el sistema de educación mexicano. Cesárea odiaba a Vasconcelos, aunque en ocasiones ese odio parecía más bien amor. Había un plan para la alfabetización masiva, que la maestra apenas entendió pues el borrador era caótico, y listas consecutivas de lecturas para la infancia, adolescencia y juventud que se contradecían cuando no eran claramente antagónicas. (597)<sup>85</sup>

We can again see in Cesárea a forerunner to so many of 2666's intellectually ambitious eccentrics: she has Amalfitano's pedagogical vocation, Barry Seaman's revolutionary political commitment, and Florita Almada's devotion to literacy. Bolaño is also clearly modeling this project of Cesárea's on the educational work that Gabriela Mistral undertook with Vasconcelos in the early twenties, a collaboration that yielded the anthology or reader *Lecturas para mujeres*.<sup>86</sup> Cesárea's selections are less traditional and more daring than Mistral's—they include “a popular book about gangs in the United States,” for one, and Stevenson's *Treasure Island*—but they also include classics from Aesop to Martí. Rosa explicitly objects that some of Cesárea's selections are age-inappropriate, but her criticism is mostly expressed in the strong, vague terms seen in the above passage. As with the far-future factory plan, Flora waives away her friend's proposals as fanciful and bemusing. While Cesárea's mind struck Flora as capable of bending reality out of shape during the first part of their encounter in the room on Rubén Darío Street, its specific products can be condescended to and dismissed out of hand. As usual, it feels like Bolaño is set on making it very difficult for us to figure out whether a character is a visionary or a crank. All we really have to go on is what Flora the teacher can remember, and all we really know about Rosa is that she's led a perfectly ordinary life marked by marriage and motherhood.

The two women's very different trajectories become especially clear during their last encounter at the market of the Santa Teresa city festival. Flora tells the young poets that it took

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<sup>85</sup> “It was mostly notes on the Mexican educational system, some very sensible and others completely inappropriate. Cesárea hated Secretary of Education Vasconcelos, although sometimes her hatred seemed more like love. There was a plan for general literacy, which the teacher could hardly make out because it was so chaotic, followed by reading lists for childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood, lists that were contradictory when they weren't plainly opposed.” (634-5)

<sup>86</sup> For an extensive overview of Mistral's pedagogical labors, see “Lo mejor de Chile está ahora en México” by Fabio Moraga Valle.



her two visits to confirm that the woman she saw selling herbs at that event was the same woman whom she'd met on Rubén Darío Street years before. The main reason is that the seller of herbs she spots is tremendously fat, while Cesárea was much thinner. For the second time in her testimony, Rosa is exactly detailed in her description, but this time, instead of generating an air of supernatural menace by itemizing Cesárea's room and trying to pinpoint what frightens her about Cesárea's voice, she paints a picture of Cesárea's transformed body: her "trunk-like" arms, the shape and gigantic dimensions of a head that "still retained the nobility of Cesárea Tinajero's head," the claw-like grip of her hands (635; translation modified). Flora tells her old friend that she has three children and still works at the school but keeps herself from asking about Cesárea's domestic life because she believes she knows the answer: "pensé en preguntarle a Cesárea si se había casado y si tenía hijos, pero no llegó a formular pregunta alguna pues se dio cuenta por si misma que no se había casado ni tenía hijos" (ibid.).<sup>87</sup> Choosing to ask about where she lives instead, Flora learns that Cesárea splits her time between Villaviciosa—a place mythologized in all of Bolaño's Sonoran fictions and in *2666* above all as a town of murderers<sup>88</sup>—and El Palito, a town across the border in Arizona. Flora then reports that she talked her husband into allowing her to invite Cesárea over for dinner but when she goes to find her at the market the next day Cesárea's gone (599).

Flora never sees Cesárea again but the young poets seeking her out do. They find her in Villaviciosa thanks to Flora's tip and find her to be as otherworldly as the teacher had suggested. Ulises and Arturo talk to her but our narrator tells us nothing of what she says; instead, he gawks at her: "Cesárea no tenía nada de poética. Parecía una roca o un elefante" (602).<sup>89</sup> But Cesárea's size proves to be more than just a curiosity and a disappointment to these young poets. The novel's action now culminates in a kind of desert inversion of the end of *Moby-Dick* as the seeker saves their life and loses her own. Lupe's pimp and his corrupt cop friend catch up to the group on the road just outside of town, and García Madero does as he's told and stays in the car, watching his older friends square off, the former poet a war machine behind them: "un poco más atrás, balanceándose como un buque de guerra fantasma, vi la espalda acorazada de Cesárea Tinajero" (603).<sup>90</sup> The fight itself is a blur, but García Madero also sees its final action: "vi a Cesárea, vi la mole de Cesárea Tinajero que apenas podía correr pero que corría, derrumbándose sobre ellos, y oí dos balazos más y bajé del coche. Me costó apartar el cuerpo de Cesárea de los cuerpos del policía y de mi amigo" (604).<sup>91</sup> In the end, it's that unaccountably massive body that's crucial to the young people's survival. Despite belonging to an earlier generation of the avant-garde, she's perhaps the truest embodiment of the courage and generosity that Auxilio Lacouture sees in the doomed youth who died at Tlatelolco as well as across the continent's

<sup>87</sup> "she thought about asking Cesárea whether she had married and had children, but she couldn't formulate the question because she could see or herself that Cesárea hadn't married and didn't have children" (636)

<sup>88</sup> A couple of pages later, from the introductory paragraph to the journal entry in which the detectives finally encounter Cesárea: "El pueblo de Villaviciosa es un pueblo de fantasmas. El pueblo de asesinos perdidos del norte de México, el reflejo más fiel de Aztlán, dijo Lima. No lo sé. Más bien un pueblo de gente cansada o aburrida" (601). "The town of Villaviciosa is a ghost town. The northern Mexican town of lot assassins, the closest thing to Aztlán, said Lima. I don't know. It's more like a town of the tired or the bored." (639)

<sup>89</sup> For all that the language used to describe Cesárea is demystifying, she retains some of the cheap horror-movie menace that Flora saw in her apartment years before, as she "black eyes, which seemed to absorb all the sun in the patio" (640). "there was nothing poetic about her. She looked like a rock or an elephant." (639)

<sup>90</sup> "a little farther back, rocking like a phantom battleship, I saw Cesárea Tinajero's armor-plated back" (641)

<sup>91</sup> "I saw Cesárea, I saw the huge bulk of Cesárea Tinajero, who could hardly run but was running, toppling onto them, and I heard two more shots and I got out of the car. I had trouble moving Cesárea's body off the bodies of the policeman and my friend." (642)

killing fields. And for all that Óscar Amalfitano figures the reading and writing of ambitious books as a life-or-death struggle, here is a real sacrifice and the unambiguous end to a life. The victims in Bolaño's fiction, not least in "The Part About the Crimes," are either already dead when they enter into the novel's frame or their deaths remain equivocal possibilities once the novel moves on. In the long middle section of *Detectives salvajes*, which precedes this story in the novel's pages but succeeds it in the story-world, the fates of all the young people Cesárea saves are open questions.

So how representative is Cesárea's death, in the last analysis? It might feel as ambiguous as all those that Bolaño leaves well beyond the frames of his fiction, but the manner of its telling does signify a few things. For one, her massive weight, which so startles Flora and García Madero, both of whom see it as a rejection of the normative life laid out for women, is precisely what allows her to overpower the men attacking the near-strangers she feels compelled to aid and defend. Unlike the women we'll turn to in a moment, Cesárea never gives her reasons for withdrawing into a kind of hermitage, but her rejection of a normal body and a normal life affords her a heroic destiny. The young people through whom we hear about her transformed self might regard her with incomprehension, but for all the air of mystery around her, her sacrifice is undeniable. Cesárea, like the many characters in *2666* who resemble her, wants to help the young people around her. Unlike them, she sacrifices herself for their sake. The irony and apparent senselessness of her death casts the search we've read about over the course of the novel in a melancholy new light (immediately after the fight: "Belano decía que la habíamos cagado, habíamos encontrado a Cesárea solo para traerle la muerte" (605)),<sup>92</sup> but it's the rare guarantee that someone who becomes an idol at least possesses genuine courage. Cesárea's desert sacrifice couldn't lie farther away from the many instances of selling out to the literary and political establishment that make the latter parts of *Detectives* toilsome to get through. Does it suggest that heroism or right action is only available to she who has fully removed herself from society? *2666* picks up that question when it tells the stories of the women who live through the horrors of Santa Teresa. It's to them we now finally turn.

### The Women Who Make "Crimes" Bearable

A historico-theoretical-political compendium on collective being and coercion, Elias Canetti's *Crowds and Power*, like Solanas's *SCUM Manifesto*, feels like a real-world antecedent of the speeches Bolaño gives his angry, charismatic orators in *2666*.<sup>93</sup> Canetti opens an especially ambitious and speculative chapter on "Invisible Crowds" in this way: "Over the whole earth, wherever there are men, is found the conception of the *invisible dead*. It is tempting to call it humanity's oldest conception... Man has been obsessed by them; they have been of enormous importance for him; the action of the dead upon the living has been an essential part of life itself" (42). He goes on to offer a survey of how different people conceive of their dead as lingering presences who shape the life of the living. As I turn to "The Part About the Crimes," I will focus on the profound effect that the dead, mostly young women of Santa Teresa have on the women

<sup>92</sup> "I heard Belano say that we'd fucked up, that we'd found Cesárea only to bring her death." (643)

<sup>93</sup> It's even cited, in typically unscholarly fashion, at the beginning of "The Part About Archiboldi" in order to define the essence of German-ness that Hans Reiter's lacks: "Canetti y creo que también Borges, dos hombres tan distintos, dijeron que así como el mar era el símbolo o el espejo de los ingleses, el bosque era la metáfora en donde vivían los alemanes. De esta regla quedó fuera Hans Reiter desde el momento de nacer." (797)

"Canetti and Borges too, I think—two very different men—said that just as the sea was the symbol or mirror of the English, the forest was the metaphor the German inhabited. Hans Reiter defied this rule from the moment he was born." (639)

who survive them. In particular, I will focus on a remarkable trio of Santa Teresinas from quite different backgrounds whose stories are threaded throughout this novel-length section of the book. Taken together, their stories demonstrate how the murderous machismo that produces the femicides also constrains and warps the lives of the women it leaves relatively unscathed. Like Liz Norton or Cesárea Tinajero, all three of these women are hybrid figures between the questers and the oracles that I've been tracking through this dissertation. And like Norton or Amalfitano, they first appear as if they're there to just dispense some strange wisdom through big speeches. They then go on to show to just what extent they possess lives and projects of their own. They offer three very different ways of facing up to the epidemic of femicides that they live among that, taken together, demonstrate the duty we have to confront this massive evil and the massive difficulty, if not the impossibility, of eradicating it within the current individualistic dispensation. And while they're ultimately incapable of coalescing into a counterforce like Solanas's imagined S.C.U.M., their solitary struggles show how destructive the gender system is, for everyone it touches.

In several different senses, "The Part About the Crimes" is more impersonal than the other sections of *2666*. This is more a difference of degree than a categorical break. As we saw in Chapter 1, all of the novel's parts juxtapose detail-heavy reportage—what book a critic reads at what moment, what military unit a soldier belongs to—with intemperate speeches and accounts of all kinds of intimate, subjective experiences. "Crimes" infamously expends an exhausting amount of time on its exhaustive catalog of the corpses of the murdered and mutilated women found throughout Santa Teresa over a five-year span. As has been widely noted, Bolaño both adopts the flat, affectless, objectifying tone of a forensic pathologist in order to describe the discovery of these women's bodies and deploys a kind of free indirect discourse that folds the reactions of various Santa Teresinxs into his narration. The section's first paragraph is paradigmatic of this polyphony. It begins with a listing of facts: "La muerte apareció en un pequeño descampado en la colonia Las Flores. Vestía camiseta blanca de manga larga y falda de color amarillo hasta las rodillas, de una talla superior" (443);<sup>94</sup> and ends with a cop interrogating a pair of women who have come to pray over the body: "El que tenía la pistola desenfundada les preguntó si la conocían. No, señor, dijo una de las mujeres. Nunca la habíamos visto. Esta criatura no es de aquí" (443).<sup>95</sup> The next couple of hundred pages will follow this pattern of alternating between gruesome discovery and shocked reaction. The section includes a great many minor characters and also a small but meaningfully diverse group of people united by their common investment in the crimes. The larger cast as a whole is overwhelmingly male but there are a few women among them who take star turns, whose words and stories keep us reading as the bodies pile up. Mysterious to—and misunderstood by—the men around them, their narratives offer us glimpses of stoicism, even of heroism, in the face of a machismo of mass-murderous proportions. These, of course, are traditionally masculine virtues and these women do not embody them in uncomplicated ways, but I wager that a close and careful reading of their fragmentary narratives can better help us understand the way gender is deployed in Bolaño's novel while also allowing us to continue the examination of the ways in which *2666* constitutes an inquiry into the possibilities for communion between individuals in a socially atomized world.

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<sup>94</sup> "The girl's body turned up in a vacant lot in Colonia Las Flores. She was dressed in a white long-sleeved t-shirt and yellow knee-length skirt, a size too big." (353)

<sup>95</sup> "The policeman with the gun asked whether they knew her. No, sir, said one of the women. We've never seen her before. She isn't from around here, poor thing." (353)

The sheer amount of text dedicated to the minute descriptions of the dead women makes “Crimes” by far the most difficult to read of *2666*’s sections. That is precisely why Elvira Campos, Florita Almada, and Azucena Esquivel Plata are so important to the section’s development: each of them carves out a realm of freedom, however tenuous, amidst the horror and each of them embodies a sense of what action might look like amidst paralysis and hopelessness. Which isn’t to say that these women are triumphant: each of them is eventually undone by the enormity of the atrocities taking place around them. They achieve a kind of dignity in defeat, but their desires and projects are no more fulfilled than those of any of the other characters who populate *2666*.

### **The Mexican Mummy Elvira Campos**

There are characters in *2666*, like the old man in Cologne or the Black Panther Barry Seaman, who, like Father Mapple in *Moby Dick*, erupt into the narrative to deliver a pyrotechnic speech. With the notable exception of Óscar Amalfitano,<sup>96</sup> who delivers such a speech in the novel’s first part before becoming the focus of the second, the protagonists that the novel follows closely are the audiences for these speeches. The three most prominent women in “Crimes” occupy a middle space between the major-character seekers and the minor-character oracles. Like Liz Norton, they aren’t really the focus of the stories they appear in—we encounter them through the eyes of the men around them—but, also like Norton, all of them get to speak for themselves and reveal something of what living amidst such violence has meant to them.

Elvira Campos, the director of the Santa Teresa insane asylum, is the first living woman to make a substantial appearance in “Crimes.” We first encounter her when the detective Juan de Dios Martínez, one of the few honest cops in the Santa Teresa police force and someone who will eventually be charged with investigating an overwhelming number of the femicides, visits her institution in order to see if one of her patients might be the mysterious desecrator of local churches that the tabloid press has dubbed “El Penitente.” This case of the Penitent, threaded together with the descriptions of the first few discovered bodies at the very beginning of “Crimes,” is a curious one. The man’s violent incursions into churches are described in considerable detail, yield a body count, and conjure up real dread before ceasing as abruptly and inexplicably as they began. The story of the Penitent both stands in contrast to the femicides—we are pointedly told that it receives greater media attention than they do (459)—and serves as a kind of synecdoche and prefiguration of how those murders will be treated throughout the novel. It is a crime that brings together a set of disparate individuals: not only the detective and the director of the asylum but also other investigators and the victims of the attacks: sacristans, priests, and seminary students. Its telling sets an important pattern for the section as a whole insofar as it alights on just about everyone invested in solving its mystery and tarries with no one else.

Elvira Campos stands out from this story’s cast in a number of ways. Not only is she a woman whom the detective finds immediately and intensely attractive, she’s highly educated, a cosmopolitan (born in Guadalajara, educated in Mexico City and at Berkeley), with bourgeois tastes (modern art, classical music, vegetarian food), who refuses to accede to Martínez’s request for the release of a couple of her patients for a police line-up. Above all, she’s the first example of several voices of intellectual authority to pronounce on the crimes of Santa Teresa. Martínez

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<sup>96</sup> And elsewhere in Bolaño’s oeuvre, Auxilio Lacouture, whose set-piece monologue in *Los detectives salvajes* is expanded to novella length in *Amuleto*. More on her follows in the section on Florita Almada.

and his fellow investigators are baffled by the Penitent's motivation but Campos offers a neat diagnosis: "sacraphobia."

When Martínez asks Campos for more information on sacraphobia, she takes him through a catalog of different phobias that she considers endemic to Mexicans. It's yet another of 2666's set-piece speeches, a disquisition on arcane words that offers up an oasis of order in a desert of chaos. Unlike the monologic harangues we've examined so far, the catalog of phobias is somewhere between a catechism and a dialogue. More specifically, it is a flirtatious back and forth between the psychiatrist and the detective that culminates in a meeting between the two that's simultaneously a conference on the case of the Penitent and a kind of first date. Martínez opens the scene by asking about the diagnosis of sacraphobia that Campos had proffered over the phone but before providing Campos's reply, Bolaño constructs a dreamlike scene by sharply cutting between the couple's conversation and what's going on around them in the restaurant:

¿Qué edad tiene usted?, dijo la directora. Treintaicuatro años, dijo Juan de Dios Martínez. Diecisiete años menos que yo. No parece que tuviera más de cuarenta, dijo el judicial. La directora se rió: hago gimnasia todos los días, no fumo, bebo poco, como sólo cosas sanas, antes salía a correr por las mañanas. ¿Ya no? No, ahora he comprado una cinta deslizante. Los dos se rieron. Escucho a Bach con auriculares y suelo correr entre cinco y diez kilómetros al día. Sacrofobia. Si les digo a mis compañeros que el Penitente padece sacrofobia me voy a anotar un tanto. El tipo con perfil de mangosta se levantó de la silla y le dijo algo al oído al acordeonista. Luego volvió a sentarse y el acordeonista se quedó con un gesto de disgusto dibujado en los labios. Como un niño a punto de echarse a llorar. La violinista tenía los ojos abiertos y sonreía. El narcotraficante y la tipa con perfil de gata pegaron sus cabezas. La nariz del narco era grande y huesuda y tenía un aire aristocrático. ¿Pero aristocrático de qué? Salvo los labios, el resto de la cara del acordeonista estaba desencajada. Ondas desconocidas atravesaron el pecho del judicial. Este mundo es extraño y fascinante, pensó. (477)<sup>97</sup>

This scene captures how Santa Teresa is simultaneously the most comprehensively described place in 2666 and the most mysterious. Part of this has to do with how close the third-person "omniscient" narrative voice hews to the perspective of the detective. From earlier in the scene we know it's Martínez who's pegged the mysterious man as a *narco* and we can surmise that these further guesses about his appearance are all made by the detective, who can imagine, and even physically feel, the threat that the *narco* and his uncanny companions must have leveled at the musician but who remains as helpless to do anything about it as any civilian. That tableau of menace is, of course, placed in direct contrast to his flirtation with Elvira Campos, whose

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<sup>97</sup> "How old are you? asked the director. Thirty-four, said Juan de Dios Martínez. Seventeen years younger than me. You don't look more than forty, said the inspector. The director laughed: I exercise every day, I don't smoke, I drink very little, I eat right, I used to go running every morning. Not anymore? No, now I've bought myself a treadmill. The two of them laughed. I listen to Bach on my headphones and I almost always run three or four miles a day. Sacraphobia. If I tell my colleagues the Penitent is suffering from sacraphobia, they'll laugh at me. The man with the mongoose face rose from his chair and said something into the accordionist's ear. Then he sat down again and the accordionist's mouth screwed up into a pout. Like a child on the verge of tears. The violinist had her eyes open and she was smiling. The *narco* and the woman with the cat face bent their heads together. The *narco*'s nose was big and bony and aristocratic looking. But aristocratic looking how? There was a wild expression on the accordionist's face, except for his lips. Unfamiliar currents surged through the inspector's chest. The world is a strange and fascinating place, he thought." (381)

description of her exercise routine contains a clear hint of the danger she would be under if she kept running in the streets of Santa Teresa.

The last line of the section also serves as a keynote for the interrogation-cum-lecture that Elvira Campos then launches into. Like Amalfitano's praise of the "great, torrential works," or Guadalupe Roncal's line about no one paying attention to these crimes that "contain the secret of the world," Campos's phobia catalog is one of those richly quotable passages of *2666* that commentators love to yank free from its context. This isn't to suggest that its famous, confident assertions that "todos los mexicanos, en el fondo, padecemos de sacrofobia"<sup>98</sup> or that "casi todos los mexicanos tienen miedo de las mujeres,"<sup>99</sup> aren't borne out by the novel as a whole. They ought to be considered, I want to suggest, as parts of the larger catalog, which offers a different kind of strangeness and fascination from that surrounding the narco and his monstrous friends, and which also functions as a perverse kind of foreplay, as it's the last conversation between the director and the detective that we're privy to before they go to bed.

There is an absolute confidence to the way Campos goes through the different phobias. It's a self-assurance that marks her character for much of her narrative. Though the two characters have agreed to use the informal *tú*, for the length of the catalog she addresses the detective as *usted* and invites him to guess what a certain phobia might mean based on its prefix, or to decide which phobia he would prefer to suffer from, only to then come out and inform him why his choice might be misguided, what he might be missing in choosing as he does. The catalog of phobias begins with a practical motivation—understanding and thus perhaps capturing the Penitent—but quickly exceeds this purpose and becomes something far stranger and, from the point of view of the reader, far more enjoyable. We join Martínez in enjoying Campos's simultaneously orderly and unpredictable display of erudition. As Robert E. Belknap writes of literary lists: "There can be great satisfaction in the search for order in a list, whether that feeling be due to an appreciation of explicitly patterned artistry, a delight in unforeseen and unexpected combinations, or the writer's invitation to the reader to generate his or her own sense of meaning, to piece matters together in whatever way seems right" (5).

Interspersed among the recitation and definition of the various phobias are the morbid consequences, from suicide to self-mutilation, that many of them can lead to. The scene never becomes a real substantive exchange, but it's undoubtedly a scene of instruction and a demonstration of Elvira Campos's disciplined command of her field. The sheer delight in enumeration should not be neglected either: like the scene that opens the final section of *Los detectives salvajes*, wherein the teenage poet-aspirant Juan García Madero and the equally-young prostitute Lupe dazzled the poet heroes of their circle by respectively schooling them on classical prosody and street slang, Campos's catalog of phobias is a sojourn in the pleasure of list-making and the sheer diversity of language.<sup>100</sup>

As her story advances, we slowly begin to understand that Elvira Campos has so completely mapped out the social world as a collection of overwhelming, life-defining fears because she herself suffers from an incapacitating fear of aging and of losing her good looks. Her reaction to the femicides is deeply conditioned by this fear. Here, for instance, is one of the very

<sup>98</sup> "I'd say all Mexicans are essentially sacrophobes." (381)

<sup>99</sup> "Almost all Mexican men are afraid of women." (382)

<sup>100</sup> It's worth noting that in the immediate aftermath of Cesárea's death, in the very closing pages of *Detectives*, Lupe and García Madero find solace in enumeration. The novel, in fact, winds down by abandoning language altogether. A series of picture riddles mark its last two pages, along with short lists of Sonoran towns: "Cucurpe, Tuape, Meresichic, Opodepe... Carbó, El Oasis, Félix Gómez, El Cuatro, Trincheras, La Ciénega... Bamuri, Pitiquito, Caborca, San Juan, Las Maravillas, Las Calenturas" (608).

first scenes in which we're given access to Campos's own thoughts, as opposed to Martínez's experience of them:

A veces Elvira Campos tenía la sospecha de que todo México se había vuelto loco. Cuando vio en la tele a las mujeres del MA [Mujeres en Acción, a feminist activist organization] reconoció a una de éstas como una antigua compañera de universidad. Estaba cambiada, *mucho más vieja*, pensó con estupor, *con más arrugas, con las mejillas caídas*, pero se trataba de la misma persona. La doctora González León. ¿Aún ejercería la medicina? ¿Y por qué ese desdén hacia la vidente de Hermosillo? A la directora del centro psiquiátrico de Santa Teresa le dieron ganas de preguntarle más cosas acerca de los crímenes a Juan de Dios Martínez, pero supo que hacerlo era como estrechar la relación, entrar, *juntos*, en una habitación cerrada de la que sólo ella tenía la llave. A veces Elvira Campos pensaba que lo mejor sería irse de México. O suicidarse antes de cumplir los cincuentaicinco. ¿Tal vez los cincuentaiséis? (641, italics in the original)<sup>101</sup>

Some of the fixations Campos expresses here are familiar from the night of the catalog of phobias: the idea of irrationality taking over all of Mexico (like several characters in "Crimes," she insists on a national frame), the focus on the ravages of aging, the absolute assurance that she alone as Santa Teresa's expert on abnormal psychiatry knows the truth about the crimes. By showing us this lonely, heroic woman watching a demonstration on TV, the novel also thematizes the precise complaint that Jean Franco levels against it in "Questions for Bolaño." 2666's characters aren't unaware that organization and collective action are taking place to combat the femicides; they just don't see those as viable ways of fighting the scourge. Dr. Campos could reach out to her old classmate Dr. González León and join M.A., but she is instead put off two things: the contempt the group exhibits for Florita Almada and how old González León looks.

These are very different reasons for being suspicious, but both are telling in their own ways. Even though Elvira Campos clearly revels in her medical expertise, her indignation about the treatment of a folk seer at the hands of the activist group suggests that she respects alternative forms of knowledge and that she has no time for those who don't. At the same time, intolerance is precisely what she exhibits towards a classmate who doesn't appear to share the exacting health and beauty regimens she's so devoted to. Campos is ready to extend solidarity to a fellow solitary expert but insists on policing certain gendered beauty standards. González León is doing precisely what we'll later find out Florita Almada is doing, i.e. drawing attention to the femicides and insisting that action be taken, but in sharing a medical and class background with Campos, she's far too close for comfort. In time it comes out that this expert clinician, vanquisher of phobias, is herself deeply terrified of aging and the ugliness she takes it to bring.

And it's not just her incomprehension of the M.A. activists that's shaped by this fear. As her story unfolds we learn that it conditions her treatment of Juan de Dios Martínez. In Campos's

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<sup>101</sup> "Sometimes Elvira Campos suspected that all of Mexico had gone crazy. When she saw the WA women, she recognized one of them as an old friend from college. She looked different, *much older*, she thought in astonishment, *more wrinkled, sunken cheeks*, but she was the same person. Dr. González León. Was she still practicing medicine? And why this scorn for the seer from Hermosillo? The director of the Santa Teresa psychiatric center would have liked to ask Juan de Dios Martínez more about the crimes, but she knew that doing so would only deepen the relationship, lead them, *together*, into a locked room to which she alone held the key. Sometimes Elvira Campos thought it would be best to leave Mexico. Or to kill herself before she turned fifty-five. Maybe fifty-six?" (512-13)

mind, going all in with the detective in an effort to learn more about the crimes would entail becoming close enough to him that she would put her guard down, an intolerable possibility that leads her to immediate thoughts of exile and suicide. Elvira Campos is an emblematic *2666* character in this moment: skeptical of collective solutions to systemic problems but emotionally crippled by that system to such an extent that she can't even countenance the support she might find in a one-to-one connection.

As we begin to gain access to Elvira's thoughts, we see that Juan de Dios never really had a shot with her. From the very beginning of their sexual relationship, which begins on the night of the phobias, the detective fervently desires a degree of emotional openness that the psychiatrist rejects. Juan de Dios very much plays the conventionally feminine role while Elvira acts like the emotionally closed man. Their biweekly assignations always follow the same strict pattern: he visits her at her modern, immaculate, high-class apartment—as far apart as one can get in Santa Teresa from the places where he conducts his murder investigations—they have sex, and then they sit together in silence: “La directora no hablaba y Juan de Dios Martínez se aguantaba las ganas que sentía a veces de largarse a hacer preguntas o de contarle cosas de su vida que no le había contado a nadie” (481).<sup>102</sup> The two of them simply sit and watch an immutable landscape—“las luces tenues siempre eran las mismas, la ducha siempre se repetía, los atardeceres y las montañas no cambiaban, las estrellas eran las mismas” (ibid.)<sup>103</sup>—that must surely please a woman who wants time to stand still.

This arrangement, as baffling to the hapless detective as any of the mysteries in his docket, persists without progressing until the moment of crisis quoted above, which opens a sequence of events that ushers Elvira Campos out of *2666* (though perhaps not out of Juan de Dios Martínez's life; it's unclear). Shortly after the aged face of one of her classmates prompts Campos to think of suicide, a young Santa Teresa schoolteacher named Perla Beatriz Ochoterena takes her own life. This saintly teacher, who'd worked her way up from the “zero” of her tiny town of Morelos—the fact that we learn that this hamlet is found on the border of Sonora and Chihuahua and that it features “virtually nothing but photo-ready landscapes” is perfectly representative of the level of detail with which Bolaño portrays each dead young woman—to a middle-class life in Santa Teresa, leaves a “deeply-felt,” if “slightly *cursi*” letter (by Juan de Dios's reckoning) in which she mentions “all those dead girls,” and avows that she “can't take it anymore,” that she “tries to live like everyone else, but how?” (646). Martínez asks Elvira Campos for her opinion on both the likely reason for the teacher's suicide and on the books that she left behind in her apartment. Campos hedges slightly on the former, suggesting that Ochoterena was “probably depressed,” “lonely and hypersensitive” and perhaps on the verge of a “psychotic break,” but she's categorical about the latter: “Son buenos libros, dijo la directora, algunos difíciles de encontrar, al menos aquí, en Santa Teresa. Se los hacía mandar del DF, dijo Juan de Dios” (648).<sup>104</sup>

It's worth spending a moment with the teacher's bookishness because Santa Teresa's hospitality to literature, or lack thereof, is such an important motif of *2666* as a whole. Like Martínez and Campos in this moment or Part I's critics when they first encounter Amalfitano, we

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<sup>102</sup> “The director wouldn't talk and Juan de Dios Martínez would contain the urge he sometimes felt to rattle off questions or tell her things about his life he'd never told anyone.” (384)

<sup>103</sup> “the dim light was always the same, the shower was always repeated, the sunsets and the mountains never changed, the stars were the same stars.” (384)

<sup>104</sup> “They're good books, said the director, and some of them are hard to find, at least here in Santa Teresa. She had them sent from D.F., said Juan de Dios.” (518)



may find signs of literary vocation in Santa Teresa radically incongruous. And while it's true that "Crimes" is the least bookish part of the novel, the only one not focused on someone who identifies first and foremost as a reader or writer, and that books are sparse in the desert borderlands,<sup>105</sup> well-read autodidacts both major—Amalfitano, Elvira Campos, Florita Almada, and, beyond the frame of this section of the novel, Archimboldi himself—and minor—Amalfitano's aspiring protégé Marco Antonio Guerra, the disappeared chicano journalist Josué Hernández Mercado, Ms. Ochoterena—keep popping up. We can think also of the end of Part 1 in which it's Pelletier, who stays at the hotel reading and rereading Archimboldi's novels, and not Espinoza, who ventures out in the town and has an affair with precisely the kind of young woman at greatest risk, who develops a fuller sense of the magnitude of what's happening in Santa Teresa. As I recorded in Chapter 1 and will return to in Chapter 3, the characters that 2666 carries with are almost all, if not sustained by literature, at least momentarily shocked into an awareness that they share a meaningful experience with others by it. Perla Ochoterena is the rare reader who is left wholly adrift. Even Boris Ansky, murdered while still so young, gets to participate in the springtime of the revolution before falling in the reaction that followed.

Ochoterena's identity as a fellow reader must surely have struck Elvira Campos because she interests the psychiatrist in a way none of the other dead young women have:

¿Qué era lo que la profesora no soportaba?, dijo Elvira Campos. ¿La vida en Santa Teresa? ¿Las muertas en Santa Teresa? ¿Las niñas menores de edad que morían sin que nadie hiciera nada para evitarlo? ¿Era suficiente eso para llevar una mujer joven al suicidio? ¿Una universitaria se habría suicidado por esa razón? ¿Una campesina que había tenido que trabajar duro para llegar a ser profesora se habría suicidado por esa razón? ¿Una entre mil? ¿Una entre cien mil? ¿Una entre un millón? ¿Una entre cien millones de mexicanos? (649)<sup>106</sup>

Marked as speech rather than thought, this is presumably the continuation of the conversation between Martínez and Campos quoted above.<sup>107</sup> Now that the two are discussing the crimes directly, Elvira Campos is left with many more questions than answers. She is utterly nonplussed that a woman so young and so hardworking, possessed of a certain degree of culture, could kill herself because of the crimes.

Campos's latter series of questions about just how anomalous Ochoterena might be are harder to parse. We can be certain about their scope: from the way they build we know that she's still interested in the question of madness at the national level—indeed, we can read them as a rephrasing of her earlier question about whether Mexico as a whole has gone mad—but beyond

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<sup>105</sup> Here's an excerpt from the description of one Carlos Llanos, one of the confessed murderers, which appears immediately before the introduction of Florita Almada into the narrative: "en sus ratos de ocio leía libros, algo muy poco usual y que contribuía a dotarlo con un aura extraordinaria" (534).

<sup>106</sup> "What was it the teacher couldn't stand anymore? asked Elvira Campos. Life in Santa Teresa? The deaths in Santa Teresa? The underage girls who died without anyone doing anything to stop it? Would that be enough to drive a young woman to suicide? Would a college student have killed herself for that? Would a peasant girl who'd had to work hard to become a teacher have killed herself for that? One in a thousand? One in one hundred thousand? One in a million? One in one hundred million Mexicans?" (519)

<sup>107</sup> A conversation that, in the text of 2666 (and in a way that encapsulates the jarring juxtapositions that fill "Crimes") is interrupted by an appalling story about a Santa Teresa cop who urinates on a young man who has just murdered his wife.

that it's difficult to ascertain what answer would reassure her. Would she prefer that more young women were sensitive enough to take their own lives as a form of radical protest against the crimes? Or, on the contrary, is she underscoring how intolerable she finds it that even one innocent young woman could come to such a decision in her country? Whatever the case, as she prepares to exit the novel, Campos is shocked into speech, into demanding some sort of accounting of the enormity of what is happening, and no answers are forthcoming. Like so many requests and demands throughout *2666*, this one is left reverberating indefinitely. Juan de Dios Martínez, as well-meaning and competent a law enforcement authority as Santa Teresa can claim, and Elvira Campos, once so confident about diagnosing the formative fears of her fellow Mexicans, of possessing the key to the locked-room mystery of the femicides, are considering a case together for the first time since the Penitent. This time they're at a complete loss.

What follows immediately after Campos's questions about the intolerability of Mexican reality is a passage that surveys the world in which these killings happen: "En septiembre casi no hubo asesinatos de mujeres. Hubo peleas. Hubo tráfico y detenciones. Hubo fiestas y trasnochadas calientes. Hubo camiones cargados de cocaína que cruzaron el desierto. Hubo avionetas Cessna que volaron a ras del desierto como espíritus de indios católicos dispuestos a degollar a todo el mundo. Hubo conversaciones de oreja a oreja y risas y narcocorridos de fondo" (649).<sup>108</sup> *De fondo*, in the background, that's where the stories of the *narcos* remain in *2666*. Like the uncannily aristocratic narco with the cat- and mongoose-faced companions at the restaurant where Martínez and Campos discussed the Penitent, the men responsible for so much of the ambient violence of Santa Teresa remain just outside of the novel's purview. As for the simile comparing the drug runners' planes to bloodthirsty Indians, it's precisely the sort of lurid, kitschy figure that Bolaño makes sure to place in the middle of his more understated passages, a kind of microcosmic version of the juxtaposition of mundanity and monstrosity that characterizes this section of the novel in particular.

Bolaño does not depict what goes on in the *narcorranchos*,<sup>109</sup> but he gives us a sense of how the violence that emanates from them affects our protagonists. Shortly after the teacher's suicide, Juan de Dios encounters a crime so gruesome that it renders him insomniac and nearly catatonic (667). Elvira Campos's response to hearing him tell this story is worth quoting in full:

Cuando le contó a Elvira Campos lo que sucedía, la directora del psiquiátrico lo escuchó en silencio y luego, mucho rato después, mientras ambos descansaban desnudos en la penumbra del dormitorio, le confesó que ella a veces soñaba que lo dejaba todo. Es decir, que lo dejaba todo de forma radical, sin paliativos de ningún tipo. Soñaba, por ejemplo, que vendía su piso y otras dos propiedades que tenía en Santa Teresa, y su automóvil y sus joyas, todo lo vendía hasta alcanzar una cifra respetable, y luego soñaba que tomaba un avión a París, en donde alquilaba un piso muy pequeño, un estudio, digamos entre

<sup>108</sup> "In September there were almost no killings of women. There were fights. There were drug deals and arrests. There were parties and long hot nights. There were trucks loaded with cocaine crossing the desert. There were Cessna planes flying low over the desert like the spirits of Catholic Indians ready to slit everyone's throats. There were whispered conversations and laughter and *narcocorridos* in the background" (519; translation modified)

<sup>109</sup> Here is Chris Andrews, writing on what Bolaño chooses not to narrate in "Crimes": "It might be suggested...that the decision not to represent the commission of the serial murders is a principled refusal. Perhaps, like J.M. Coetzee's fictional novelist Elizabeth Costello, Bolaño felt that some places should be forbidden to fiction...The *narcorranchos* seen in the distance near the end of 'The Part About the Crimes' may be such places. There are limits to the horror of *2666*: what the serial killers do to the women—the process of torture and rape—is not narrated, although the results are abundantly described, with forensic precision and realistic repetitiveness." (167)

Villiers y la Porte de Clichy, y luego se iba a ver a un médico famoso, un cirujano plástico que hacía maravillas, para que le realizara un lifting, para que le arreglara la nariz y los pómulos, para que le aumentara los senos, en fin, que al salir de la mesa de operaciones parecía otra, una mujer diferente, ya no de cincuenta y tantos años sino de cuarenta y tantos o, mejor, cuarenta y pocos, irreconocible, nueva, cambiada, rejuvenecida, aunque por supuesto durante un tiempo iba vendada a todas partes, como si fuera la momia, no la momia egipcia sino la momia mexicana, cosa que le gustaba, salir a pasear en el metro, por ejemplo, sabiendo que todos los parisinos la miraban subrepticamente, incluso algunos le cedían el asiento, pensando o imaginando los dolores horribles, quemaduras, accidente de tránsito, por los que había pasado aquella desconocida silenciosa y estoica, y luego de bajarse del metro y entrar en un museo o en una galería de arte o una librería de Montparnasse, y estudiar francés dos horas diarias, con alegría, con ilusión, qué bonito es el francés, qué idioma más musical, tiene un *je ne sais quoi*, y luego, una mañana lluviosa, quitarse las vendas, despacio, como un arqueólogo que acaba de encontrar un hueso indescriptible, como una niña de gestos lentos que deshace, paso a paso, un regalo que quisiera dilatar en el tiempo, ¿para siempre?, casi para siempre, hasta que finalmente cae la última venda, ¿adónde cae?, al suelo, a la moqueta o a la madera, pues el suelo es de primera calidad, y en el suelo todas las vendas se estremecen como culebras, o todas las vendas abren sus ojos adormilados como culebras, aunque ella sabe que no son culebras sino más bien los ángeles de la guarda de las culebras, y luego alguien le acerca un espejo y ella se contempla, se asiente, se aprueba con un gesto en el que redescubre la soberanía de su niñez, el amor de su padre y de su madre y luego firma algo, un papel, un documento, un cheque, y se marcha por las calles de París. ¿Hacia una nueva vida?, dijo Juan de Dios Martínez. Supongo que sí, dijo la directora. Tú a mí me gustas tal como eres, dijo Juan de Dios Martínez. Una nueva vida sin mexicanos ni México ni enfermos mexicanos, dijo la directora. Tú a mí me vuelves loco tal como eres, dijo Juan de Dios Martínez. (668-9)<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> “When he told Elvira Campos what was happening to him, the asylum director listened in silence and then, for a long time afterward, as they lay naked in the dusk of the bedroom, she confessed that she sometimes dreamed of giving up everything. In other words, making a drastic break, no holds barred. She dreamed, for example, of selling her apartment and two other properties she owned in Santa Teresa, and her car and her jewelry, selling everything until she had collected a decent sum of money, and then she dreamed about flying to Paris, where she would rent a tiny apartment, a studio, say between Villiers and Porte de Clichy, and then she would go and see a famous doctor, a wonder-working plastic surgeon, get a face-lift, get her nose and cheekbones fixed, have her breasts enlarged, in short, when she got off the operating table she would look like someone else, a different woman, not fiftysomething anymore but fortysomething, or better yet, just over forty, unrecognizable, new, changed, rejuvenated, although of course she would go everywhere wrapped in bandages, like a mummy, not an Egyptian mummy but a Mexican mummy, which would be something she enjoyed, walking to the metro, for example, knowing that all the Parisians were watching her surreptitiously, some of them even giving up their seats for her, imagining the horrible suffering, burns, traffic accident, that this silent and stoic stranger had undergone, and then getting off the metro and going into a museum or an art gallery or a Montparnasse bookstore, and studying French for two hours a day with joy, with excitement French is so pretty, such a musical language, it has a certain *je ne sais quoi*, and then, one rainy morning, taking off her bandages, slowly, like an archaeologist who has just discovered an incredible bone, like a girl who carefully unwraps, bit by bit, a present that she wants to make last, forever? nearly forever, until finally the last bandage falls, where does it fall? to the floor, to the rug or the wooden floor, in any case a top-quality floor, and on the floor all the bandages slither like snakes, or all the bandages open their sleepy eyes like snakes, although she knows they aren’t snakes but the guardian angels of snakes, and then someone brings her a mirror and she stares at herself, she nods at herself, she approves of herself, with a gesture in which she rediscovers the sovereignty of childhood, the love of her father and mother, and then she signs something, a paper, a document, a check, and she

We never find out how successful Juan de Dios's reassurances, the undoubtedly heartfelt clichés that are all he can offer in response to Elvira's disquieting dream of escape, turn out to be. In fact, we never hear from Elvira Campos again; she effectively writes herself out of the novel with this speech. Nevertheless, the odds for a transformation in the couple's romantic fortunes appear slim. Elvira has nothing to say to Juan de Dios when he describes the magnitude of his own trauma and her confession that she wishes to move to Paris would seem to confirm his fears that she cares deeply about a kind of life and a kind of culture that's deeply foreign to him. The references to Villiers and the Porte de Clichy—those specific geographical markers that Bolaño is so fond of including whenever he writes about a city—acquire a new degree of poignancy here as there's very little chance that they mean anything to Juan de Dios.

At the same time, knowing what we know about Santa Teresa it's impossible to condemn out of hand Elvira's desire to flee. Her twinned visions of Paris and of transformation through plastic surgery read almost like a collage of ad copy but only up to a point: in her dream she *likes* being the Mexican mummy, she enjoys retaining some degree of difference from the Parisians around her, and the removal of her bandages, which seems to promise a brief moment of terror when the bandages turn to snakes, becomes oddly affirmative and nostalgic as she thinks of guardian angels and feels the lost "sovereignty" of her childhood, of being looked after by her parents.<sup>111</sup>

Liz Norton, too, turns to thoughts of her childhood as a way of staving off the "horrible city" of Santa Teresa.<sup>112</sup> But while the Englishwoman exits the novel by taking a leap of faith and pledging herself to Morini—"No sé cuánto tiempo vamos a durar juntos... Ni a Morini (creo) ni a mí nos importa. Nos queremos y somos felices" (207)<sup>113</sup>—Elvira closes by effectively telling Juan de Dios that she believes that the only way that she can recover the freedom and happiness of her youth is by beginning a wholly new life abroad. From the very beginning of their relationship Juan de Dios has been attempting to convey to Elvira that he is not like other men,<sup>114</sup> and, given everything we know about his behavior during the dozens of cases he takes throughout the length of "Crimes," he's right. He will receive a few more cases before "Crimes" peters out but as far as the novel's concerned Elvira is gone. The romantic couple is not a form that thrives in the world of *2666*.

This is her moment of disappearance, a story that we've encountered before in the course of the novel: the critics accepting their incapacity to find Archiboldi, Amalfitano's dream of Boris Yeltsin, (the ironically named) Fate facing the terrifying giant. These characters burn out and fade away at the same time: there's nothing to indicate that they don't go on living the same

steps out into the streets of Paris. Into a new life? asked Juan de Dios Martínez. I suppose so, said the director. I like you the way you are, said Juan de Dios Martínez. A new life without Mexicans or Mexico or Mexican patients, said the director. I'm crazy about you the way you are, said Juan de Dios Martínez." (534-5)

<sup>111</sup> Bolaño's high estimation of the "sovereignty" of youth and childhood recurs elsewhere: see the excursus on the end of *Amuleto* below.

<sup>112</sup> "En Santa Teresa, en esa ciudad horrible... pensé en Jimmy, pero sobre todo pensé en mí, en la que yo era a la edad de ocho años..." (189)

"In Santa Teresa, in that horrible city... I thought about Jimmy, but mostly I thought about me, about what I was like at eight" (143)

<sup>113</sup> "I don't know how long we'll last together... it doesn't matter to me or to Morini either (I think). We love each other and we're happy." (159)

<sup>114</sup> During the catalog of phobias, for instance, he tries to interrupt Elvira's description of dendrophobia, fear of trees, in order to return to the topic of gynophobia: "Algunos mexicanos padecen ginefobia, dijo Juan de Dios Martínez, pero no todos, no sea usted alarmista" (478). #NotAllMexicanMen

lives we've become acquainted with, but in their narrative "deaths" they also simultaneously seem to give up something essential about who they are and what they most deeply hope for. The possibility of joining together with others to make the world a better place is endlessly deferred, when not foreclosed.

### La Santa Florita Almada

It's unclear whether we're to take Florita Almada, the seventy-year-old seer from Hermosillo, seriously or as the object of an extremely dark joke. Alone among the major women characters in *2666*, we hear from her, rather than from the men around her, first: though the ambivalence her visions inspire in us is eventually dramatized in the novel itself, where characters either become her devotees or take her to be a fraud, we don't really know anything about her before she releases a massive torrent of words, a speech part autobiography, part dietary self-help manual, part catalog of folk cures, and part poetry reading, that culminates in her vision of the dead girls of Santa Teresa and her demand that something be done about the crimes. Unlike virtually every other great speech in *2666*, Florita's opening monologue doesn't have an identifiable listener. It begins as and shifts into and out of reported speech, but most of its words are clearly hers and reading it feels almost like a combination of having a session with her in her capacity as a healer—she's only received the gift of sight recently and still considers that to be her primary occupation—and interviewing her, asking her for her life story, for her account of herself. There's no communicative situation that the welter of facts and stories and aphorisms that she puts forth could actually fit, however. To borrow a line Jean Franco writes about Barry Seaman, another of the novel's great speakers, Florita presents us with "the unclassifiable knowledge that accumulates over a lifetime" (*Cruel Modernity*, 237).

A knowledge that, to be sure, Florita is more than willing to impart. To read her speech is to be overwhelmed by her genial lessons. Her segue from her taxonomy of botanomancy to the telling of her life story is just one of the many epigrammatic pieces of advice that link the topics of her speech together: "Cuando uno sabe, sabe, y cuando no sabe lo mejor es aprender. Y, mientras tanto, no decir nada, a lo menos que lo que uno diga esté encaminado a hacer más claro el aprendizaje. Su vida misma, según explicaba, había sido un aprendizaje constante..." (537).<sup>115</sup> Indeed, Florita's central move throughout her speech is the presentation of a manageable, finely formed pearl of wisdom after a narration of the deep dive it took to extract it. Here is her description of how her life changed when she learned to read in middle age from the children who'd visit her house to get *pinole*:

A partir de ese momento leyó todo lo que caía en sus manos. En un cuaderno anotó las impresiones y pensamientos que le produjeron sus lecturas. Leyó revistas y periódicos viejos, leyó programas políticos que cada cierto tiempo iban a tirar al pueblo jóvenes de bigotes montados en camionetas y periódicos nuevos, leyó los pocos libros que pudo encontrar y su marido, después de cada ausencia traficando con animales en los pueblos vecinos, se acostumbró a traerle libros que en ocasiones compraba no por unidad sino por

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<sup>115</sup> "When you know something, you know it, and when you don't, you'd better learn. And in the meantime, you should keep quiet, or at least speak only when what you say will advance the learning process. Her own life, as she explained, had been a constant apprenticeship." (429)

peso. Cinco kilos de libros. Diez kilos. Una vez llegó con veinte kilos. Y ella no dejó ni uno sin leer y de todos, sin excepción, extrajo alguna enseñanza. A veces leía revistas que llegaban de Ciudad de México, a veces leía libros de historia, a veces leía libros de religión, a veces leía libros léperos que la hacían enrojecer, sola, sentada a la mesa, iluminadas las páginas por un quinqué cuya luz parecía bailar o adoptar formas demoniacas, a veces leía libros técnicos sobre el cultivo de viñedos o sobre construcción de casas prefabricadas, a veces leía novelas de terror y de aparecidos, cualquier tipo de lectura que la divina providencia pusiera al alcance de su mano, y de todos ellos aprendió algo, a veces muy poco, pero algo quedaba, como una pepita de oro en una montaña de basura, o para afinar la metáfora, decía Florita, como una muñeca perdida y reencontrada en una montaña de basura desconocida. En fin, ella no era una persona instruida, al menos no tenía lo que se dice una educación clásica, por lo que pedía perdón, pero tampoco se avergonzaba de ser lo que era, pues lo que Dios quita por un lado la Virgen lo repone por el otro, y cuando eso pasa uno tiene que estar en paz con el mundo. (539)<sup>116</sup>

Florita's prodigious exertions call up other feats of reading in the novel—Pelletier burning through Archimboldi's oeuvre in his Parisian garret, Archimboldi nearly freezing to the death while reading Ansky's notebook in the shtetl hiding place, Amalfitano wrestling with the great "torrential" works—but while all of those involve quite exclusive, if not singular, experiences and apposite matches between readers and texts, Florita is advocating for something altogether different: the capacity to find something valuable, defined as something *useful*, in any text, literary or practical.<sup>117</sup> Of course, unlike Pelletier or Amalfitano (or even the bookish pharmacist

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<sup>116</sup> "From that moment on, she read everything that fell into her hands. In a notebook, she jotted down thoughts and impressions inspired by her reading. She read old magazines and newspapers, she read political flyers distributed often from pickups by young men with mustaches, she read the daily papers, she read the few books she could find and the books that her husband got into the habit of bringing back each time he returned from his buying and selling trips to neighboring towns, books he purchased sometimes by the pound. Ten pounds of books. Fifteen pounds of books. Once he came back with twenty-five pounds. And she read every single one, and from each, without exception, she drew some lesson. Sometimes she read magazines from Mexico City, sometimes she read history books, sometimes she read religious books, sometimes she read dirty books that made her blush, sitting alone at the table, the pages lit by an oil lamp's light that seemed to dance and assume demonic shapes, sometimes she read technical books about the cultivation of vineyards or the construction of prefabricated houses, sometimes she read horror stories or ghost stories, any kind of reading that providence placed within her reach, and she learned something each time, sometimes very little, but something was left behind, like a gold nugget in a trash heap of somebody else's trash. Anyway, she wasn't an educated person, at least she didn't have what you might call a classical education, for which she apologized, but she wasn't ashamed of being what she was, because what God takes away the Virgin restores, and when that's the way it is, it's impossible not to be at peace with the world." (430-1)

<sup>117</sup> In this sense, among others, Florita's advice is reminiscent of a speech given by the former Black Panther Barry Seaman to a black church in the third part of 2666. "UTILIDAD," usefulness, is the fifth and final section of Seaman's speech (along with "DANGER," "MONEY," "FOOD," and "STARS") and it culminates in his passionate testimony about how broad reading got him through his jail term: "Hay que leer libros... Lean libros de autores negros. Y de autoras negras. Pero no se queden ahí. Esa es mi verdadera aportación de esta noche... Cuando uno lee jamás pierde el tiempo. Yo en la cárcel leía. Allí me puse a leer. Mucho... Yo sabía que estaba haciendo algo útil. Eso era lo importante. Hacía algo útil mientras los carceleros caminaban o se saludaban entre ellos durante el cambio de turno con palabras amables que a mí me sonaban a insultos y que, bien mirado (se me acaba de ocurrir), tal vez fueran insultos. Yo hacía algo útil. Algo útil se lo mire como se lo mire. Leer es como pensar, como rezar, como hablar con un amigo, como exponer tus ideas, como escuchar las ideas de los otros, como escuchar música (sí, sí), como contemplar un paisaje, como salir a dar un paseo a la playa." See the next chapter for a sustained discussion of this speech and encyclopedism in the novel more generally. (326)

with his taste for short stories and novellas) Florita has no say whatsoever in what she gets to read, and building a life around her love of books is never an option for her.

In fact, as the final lines quoted above suggest, Florita conceives her extraordinary course of study as a kind of compensation for her inability to have children. Shortly before describing her reading regimen she says, in response to a couple of elided questions that anyone would presumably ask a woman of her age: “Por supuesto, a ella le hubiera gustado tener hijos, pero la naturaleza (la naturaleza en general o la naturaleza de su marido, decía riéndose) le privó de tal responsabilidad. El tiempo que le hubiera dedicado a su bebé lo empleó en estudiar” (538).<sup>118</sup> Now, conventional, biological motherhood doesn’t really play a large role in *2666* until its very last pages, which, as we saw in Chapter 1, chronicle the way that Lotte Reiter’s devotion to her son Klaus brings both her, and eventually her brother Archimboldi, to Santa Teresa. Elvira Campos, for example, has an adult daughter—this is one of the first things Juan de Dios Martínez learns about her when he sees a picture of the two of them in her office—but we hardly know anything about her and she doesn’t figure at all in Elvira’s anxieties about Santa Teresa or her fantasy about starting a new life. Nevertheless, a kind of expansive, surrogate motherhood is fundamental to Florita Almada’s identity. As she comes into her own as La Santa, she treats everyone she encounters, from her inner circle of devotees to the arch-skeptical journalist Sergio González Rodríguez (“me ha llamado hijito, qué cosa más rara, me ha llamado hijito” (714)),<sup>119</sup> as her child, and, at the climax of her vision of the murders, right when it’s revealed to her that the city they’re taking place in is Santa Teresa, she calls the victims her daughters: “¡Es Santa Teresa! ¡Es Santa Teresa! Lo estoy viendo clarito. Allí matan a las mujeres. Matan a mis hijas. ¡Mis hijas! ¡Mis hijas!” (547).<sup>120</sup> While this could be dismissed as mere local color or folksiness—we might expect little old peasant women to call everyone *m’hijito*—I want to propose that it’s more than just that and that we ought to take Florita’s exceptional sense of responsibility and care seriously, at least up to a point. Upon meeting her, Sergio González feels the discomfort and the ambivalence that such folkloric characters inspire in cosmopolitan rationalists like himself: “Una charlatana de buen corazón, pensó Sergio. ¿Por qué de buen corazón? ¿Por qué todas las viejitas de México tenían buen corazón? Más bien un corazón de piedra, pensó Sergio, para aguantar tanto. Florita, como si le hubiera leído el pensamiento asintió varias veces” (713-4).<sup>121</sup> Stone-hearted: a phrase that might read like a damning judgment in another context,<sup>122</sup> reads like awed praise here. Time and again in Bolaño, *aguante*, endurance under pressure, appears as a cardinal virtue, and it’s clearly one that Florita possesses in spades. In the middle of *2666*’s long, slow middle, a stretch that feels designed to test how much violence we can bear as readers, we receive these glimpses of the long and hard life of a character who has been prepared by such a life to face the horror like few others. In fact, what

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<sup>118</sup> “Of course, she would have liked to have children, but nature (nature in general or her husband’s nature, she said, laughing) denied her that responsibility. The time she would have devoted to a baby, she used to study.” (430)

<sup>119</sup> “She called me *child*, it’s the oddest thing, she called me *child*.” (572)

<sup>120</sup> “It’s Santa Teresa! It’s Santa Teresa! I see it clearly now. Women are being killed there. They’re killing my daughters. My daughters! My daughters!” (436)

<sup>121</sup> “A charlatan with a heart of gold, thought Sergio. Why a heart of gold? Because all old little Mexican ladies had a heart of gold? More like a heart of flint, thought Sergio, to endure so much. Florita, as if she’d read his mind, nodded several times.” (571)

<sup>122</sup> And one that carries a lot of weight (sorry), given that it comes from the one character in the novel who appears under his own name, the heroic author of *Huesos en el desierto* who was Bolaño’s indispensable source on the femicides of Ciudad Juárez. See Marcela Valdés’s “Alone Among the Ghosts” for the best account of how the relationship between the two writers made *2666* possible.

unites the *campesina* Florita with Dr. Campos and *diputada* Esquivel Plata is lifelong experience with dehumanizing machismo. They each face the threat with different attitudes—tragic, comic, and combative respectively—and they all respond to it in their different ways, but they’re all reacting to a similar long experience of a system of gendered subordination and oppression.

I want to consider the relation between Florita’s heroism and her capacious sense of motherhood by briefly turning to that other woman in Bolaño’s fiction who makes a spectacular and anomalous appearance halfway through a long novel. Auxilio Lacouture’s testimony in *Los detectives salvajes* opens with her declaration that she is “the mother of Mexican poetry,” and then weaves the story of her life in the DF’s poetry circles around her breathless account of her greatest feat: the heroic stand she takes during the Tlatelolco massacre of 1968, when she single-handedly “preserves” the autonomy of the UNAM by hiding and reading and writing poetry in a bathroom stall while the army raids the university around her. It ends with her disavowing full maternity of Mexican poetry but reaffirming her love for the young poets around her: “no, no soy la madre de nadie, pero...eso sí, los conozco a todos, a todos los jóvenes poetas del DF, a los que nacieron aquí y a los que llegaron de provincias, y a los que el oleaje trajo de otros lugares de Latinoamérica, y que los quiero a todos” (199).<sup>123</sup>

Like Florita’s story of an autodidact, an organic intellectual among more traditional types, *Amuleto*, the novella-length version of Auxilio’s story,<sup>124</sup> is Bolaño’s most sustained engagement with the gender hierarchy in Latin American literary culture. It’s not a polemic or essayistic fiction, it doesn’t contain any extended or explicit reflections on how Auxilio’s status as a middle-aged woman (and as a Uruguayan) conditions how people regard her and her story, but those questions of identity seethe just beneath the surface throughout. Take the opening paragraph: “Ésta será una historia de terror. Será una historia policiaca, un relato de serie negra y de terror. Pero no lo parecerá. No lo parecerá porque soy yo la que lo cuenta. Soy yo la que habla y por eso no lo parecerá. Pero en el fondo es la historia de un crimen atroz” (11).<sup>125</sup> That chiasmic repetition is telling: Auxilio may not tell us what it is about her that she believes will keep us from believing in the enormity of what she’s witnessed, but she does challenge us to think about it. Similarly, as her various reminiscences about performing (often under-appreciated) affective and menial labor for various male poets accumulate into a novel, she mostly leaves judgments about what she does and how she’s treated up to her audience. At the same time, Auxilio is far from being unequivocally resentful of those she seeks to care for. She loves and admires the older Spanish expatriate poets whose house she keeps; it’s their poetry that she will read and copy during her heroic stand in the university restroom. And the “atrocious crime” that she never confronts directly but that impels her entire testimonial narrative is the massacre of young people at Tlatelolco, which, to Auxilio, comes to stand for all the crimes committed against all the rebellious youths of the Americas. She mostly cares for and mentors young men, whom she treats with great, ambivalent tenderness. When “Arturito” Belano, the young poet she’s closest to, returns to the DF from Chile in early 1974, having attempted much like his creator to do his part to preserve the Allende revolution, Auxilio pays a memorable, backhanded tribute to his folly: “Arturito había cumplido y su conciencia, su terrible conciencia de machito

<sup>123</sup> “No, I’m nobody’s mother, but I did know them all, all the young poets, whether they were natives of Mexico City, or came from the provinces, or other parts of Latin America and washed up here, and I loved them all.” (177)

<sup>124</sup> See Andrews for a discussion of the nature of Bolaño’s technique of narrative expansion, as well as the introduction to this dissertation.

<sup>125</sup> “This is going to be a horror story. A story of murder, detection, and horror. But it won’t appear to be, for the simple reason that I am the teller. Told by me, it won’t seem like that. Although, in fact, it’s the story of a terrible crime.” (1)



latinoamericano, en teoría no tenía nada que reprocharse” (66).<sup>126</sup> *Amuleto* indeed closes and culminates with a vision of a children’s crusade of young Latin Americans marching into an abyss while singing a song that Auxilio wants to immortalize: “ese canto es nuestro amuleto” are the novel’s immensely affecting last words,<sup>127</sup> words that reach out to the reader and enjoin her or him to preserve the memory of that lost cohort of idealistic young people.

Not wholly dissimilarly, Florita Almada ends her first appearance on television, during which, in a possessed furor, she’s described her vision of the murders of Santa Teresa and demanded that the state authorities be informed so that they can do something about them, by interpellating an audience that includes us: “¿Es que no entienden de qué hablo?” she asks, before looking “right at the camera” as the long first part of her story finally draws to a close (547).<sup>128</sup> The differences between Auxilio and Florita’s performances are many—I’ll address a few of them shortly—but they share a deep connection insofar as they involve women grieving for a great number of young people for whom they feel passionately. The modes and temporal orientations they’re deploying are quite distinct: even if she is asking us to (quite literally) hold on to a memory, Auxilio’s vision of the children’s crusade is ultimately elegiac,<sup>129</sup> while Florita is transformed into a fury (“propiamente una erinia”)<sup>130</sup> by her knowledge that the murder of “her” girls is ongoing (ibid.). We’ve traced how some of the other characters in *2666* are affected by the crimes but Florita’s appeal stands alone in the directness with which it turns the crimes into a personal matter.<sup>131</sup> Florita, while a proud Sonoran, doesn’t even live in Santa Teresa, yet something about the horror of the crimes committed against young women, many of whom came from towns not unlike her own, calls out to her in particular.

And that call matters a great deal in the topography of Bolaño’s fiction. While there’s obviously a world of difference between Mexico City and the deserts of Sonora (which, it’s worth remembering, are the eponymous settings of the first and final sections of *Los detectives salvajes*) where Auxilio and Florita respectively have their visions, both serve as magnets for huge numbers of young people. This is emphasized by both women near the end of their speeches: the Auxilio of *Detectives* mentions the “oleaje,” the tides of displacement that brought an entire generation of Latin Americans (Roberto Bolaño among them) to Mexico City, while Florita, with that exceeding naïveté (more on which below) that characterizes her depiction of established authority, mentions Santa Teresa’s reputation as a place where one can find work:

<sup>126</sup> “Arturito had done his duty...he’d obeyed the voice of his conscience, he’d been a brave Latin American boy, and so in theory there was nothing for him to feel guilty about.” (73)

<sup>127</sup> The last word of the novel thus reveals the meaning of its title. Bolaño seemed to have a particular affinity for this circular form more common in popular music than in literature—I’m thinking of Silvio Rodríguez’s “Por quien merece amor” and “Just Like Heaven” by The Cure, though Ursula K. Le Guin’s “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” is one literary example. Before Juan Villoro and Jorge Herralde talked him out of it, he wanted to call *Nocturno de Chile Tormentas de mierda*, which remain that novel’s final words (cf. the Maristáin interview in *Bolaño por sí mismo*). Barry Seaman’s sermon also fits this pattern section to section.

“And that song is out amulet.” (185)

<sup>128</sup> “Haven’t you understood what I’ve said?” (437)

<sup>129</sup> It’s worth noting that the Auxilio of *Amuleto* also looks to the future in her prophecies of which writers will be read when (134-5) and, of course, in the famous passage about Mexico City looking like a cemetery from the year *2666* (77).

<sup>130</sup> “A real fury” (437)

<sup>131</sup> The U.S. novelist Francine Prose frames her (immensely laudatory) review of *2666* in *Harper’s* around Florita’s appearance on TV. Prose stresses how incongruous it is that “glorious passages” like Florita’s and Barry Seaman’s speeches sit cheek-by-jowl with so much carnage throughout the novel and, pointing out that it’s surely no coincidence that the guest who precedes Florita on Reinaldo’s show is a ventriloquist with a possessed dummy, closes her piece by ascribing Florita’s appeal to us to the dying Bolaño (“More Is More”).

“una ciudad que no sólo es bella sino también industriosa y trabajadora” (547).<sup>132</sup> Both places would, of course, be turned into killing fields, but the novels that contain them represent the good and the bad of both in radically disproportionate ways: there are long stretches of both *Detectives* and *Amuleto* that, while suffused with dark omens and dread, still feel like celebrations of the possibilities that love and literature (Auxilio’s “las actitudes teatrales y soberanas del amor”) afford to the young in the D.F. While in *2666*, as we’ve seen, the lives of the murdered young women are only hinted at, never recounted, and the pleasures of literature are mostly experienced elsewhere or by other people.

People like Auxilio and Florita. Both women are gifted (or cursed) with a deep and terrible sense of what happened or is happening to the young people around them, and it’s difficult not to ascribe this to the singular reading experiences that their narratives suggest shaped them.<sup>133</sup> What sets Florita apart from a mere caricature of a sweet, wise rural *abuelita* is her seemingly unbounded encyclopedic knowledge, a knowledge that, as Jean Franco points out, includes not only different subjects but also different eras or epistemes: “Florita is the link between the folkloric and the modern” (*Cruel Modernity*, 244). To read the first Florita sequence of *2666* is to read demonstration after demonstration that Florita has mastered some field of knowledge or element of the human condition only to reach the point at which the unstoppable force of her intellect hits the intractable mystery of the crimes. Florita is able to coolly dispatch every query that’s brought to her with at least one piece of advice, but the killings of Santa Teresa prompt her to go on television in order to rage and roar that something must be done.

But reading alone didn’t grant these characters their highly developed sense of care for other people’s children: the lives they lead while not reading are hugely important as well. Here their experiences again differ significantly. Auxilio insists again and again on her first-hand experience of the literary youth of Mexico and the Americas and on the unconventional role she fulfills for them as “mother” and champion.<sup>134</sup> Florita, in contradistinction, lives what seems to be an almost wholly asocial life. While her husband is alive she’s capable of devoting her nights to study, but when he dies she becomes a wandering healer and ersatz shepherdess. (She finds herself incapable of selling the animals that her husband, an animal trader, leaves her with.) During these middle-aged years of wandering (they begin when she’s forty-five), she not only develops a “taste” for solitude, she communes with two very different nineteenth-century men: Benito Juárez and Giacomo Leopardi. At first it appears that the connection she draws between herself and Juárez is a modest one: she writes down the thoughts she has while looking after her animals in the wilderness, just as that “great, “upstanding,” man did in his childhood (540). She soon makes it clear, however, that she believes the bond between them is much deeper than this: “de esa parte de su vida [su niñez] se hablaba poco, en parte porque poco se sabía, en parte

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<sup>132</sup> “[A city that’s ] beautiful and hardworking, too.” (437)

<sup>133</sup> The extent to which this is true in Auxilio’s case is complicated because her story exists at two different temporal scales which inevitably emphasize different kinds of experience: in *Detectives* she’s exclusively the woman in the UNAM restroom while in *Amuleto* the amount of time she spends telling anecdotes about her everyday life with the young poets of Mexico gives that sense of intimacy a greater sense of importance.

<sup>134</sup> Auxilio’s relative outsider status as a foreigner, a middle-aged woman, an autodidact, and someone who supports herself through occasional, informal labor is a perfect expression of Bolaño’s anti-institutional sympathies. The woman who, in a courageous act that I believe we’re to take quite seriously, preserves the autonomy of the UNAM could never occupy a lasting or comfortable place in the academic structure or achieve any literary recognition of her own. As she puts it in memorable parenthetical lines that appear in both *Detectives* and *Amuleto*: “ese wáter es el cubículo que nunca tuve, ese wáter fue mi trinchera y mi palacio del Duino, mi epifanía de México” (*Detectives*, 197; *Amuleto*, 145).

porque los mexicanos saben que cuando hablan de niños suelen decir tonterías o cursiladas. Ella, por si no lo sabían, tenía algunas cosas que decir al respecto” (ibid.).<sup>135</sup> This is the exceptional Florita Almada, the woman of the preternatural *aguante* whom Sergio González sees beyond the stock image of the softhearted little old lady. It’s the side of her that appears when she speaks of her vast reading and, indeed, that’s precisely what she brings up next:

De los miles de libros que había leído, entre ellos libros sobre historia de México, sobre historia de España, sobre historia de Colombia, sobre historias de las religiones, sobre historia de los papas de Roma, sobre los progresos de la NASA, sólo había encontrado unas pocas páginas que retrataban con total fidelidad, con absoluta fidelidad, lo que debió de sentir, más que pensar, el niño Benito Juárez cuando salía, a veces, como es normal, por varios días con sus noches, a buscar zonas de pastura para el rebaño. En esas páginas de un libro con tapas amarillas se decía todo con tanta claridad que a veces Florita Almada pensaba que el autor había sido amigo de Benito Juárez y que éste le había confidenciado al oído las experiencias de su niñez. Si es que eso es posible. Si es que es posible transmitir lo que se siente cuando cae la noche y salen las estrellas y uno está solo en la inmensidad, y las verdades de la vida (de la vida nocturna) empiezan a desfilar una a una, como desvanecidas o como si el que está a la intemperie se fuera a desvanecer o como si una enfermedad desconocida circulara por la sangre y no nos diéramos cuenta. (ibid.)<sup>136</sup>

Recall that in her earlier description of her reading, Florita emphasizes her ability to extract something valuable from whatever dross she found in front of her. Here she’s making a very different claim about how the unique combination of her wide reading and her having spent countless hours alone at night in the wilderness gives her a privileged sense of what the most obscure hours of one of the Great Men of her country must have been like. Those who have been through the crucible of an endless string of solitary nights also clearly possess something that’s both more affective than cognitive—note that Juárez more feels than thinks on his nights out there—and that can be described as a multiplicity of truths about life/the life of the night.

And what are these feelings and truths? Florita eventually breaks them down into four numbered points, but not before effecting the most striking and extended act of literary interpolation in all of *2666*. In a fit of inspiration, “con la voz transportada,”<sup>137</sup> Florita quotes most of Leopardi’s *Canto notturno di un pastore errante dell’asia*, in Spanish, and without specific attribution (i.e. we’re told that it’s a poem with a shepherd as speaker but Leopardi’s

<sup>135</sup> “Little was said about that period of his life, in part because little was known, in part because Mexicans were aware that when they talked about children they tended to speak nonsense. Mind you, she had something to say on the subject.” (431)

<sup>136</sup> “Of the thousands of books she had read, among them books on the history of Mexico, the history of Spain, the history of Colombia, the history of religion, the history of the popes of Rome, the advances of NASA, she had come across only a few pages that depicted with complete faithfulness, utter faithfulness, what the boy Benito Juárez must have felt, more than thought, when he went out to pasture with his flock and was sometimes gone for several days and nights, as is the way of these things. Inside that book with a yellow cover everything was expressed so clearly that sometimes Florita Almada thought the author must have been a friend of Benito Juárez and that Benito Juárez had confided all his childhood experiences in the man’s ear. If such a thing were possible. If it were possible to convey what one feels when night falls and the stars come out and one is alone in the vastness, and life’s truths (night truths) begin to march past one by one, somehow swooning or as if the person out in the open were swooning or if a strange sickness were circulating in the blood unnoticed.” (431-2)

<sup>137</sup> “In a transported voice” (432)

name is never mentioned, nor is the poem's title). Rather than being set as verse on the page, Leopardi's lines are presented as prose and jointed together at widely differing lengths by the conjunction "Y también." This gives the impression that the shepherd's night thoughts are a haphazard accumulation, another list, rather than a song carefully divided into five strophes of equal length. And, while she does follow the poem's order, Florita never gets to its end: instead of the pitch-black final stanza in which the shepherd wonders whether he might be happier if he could fly like a bird or whether all creatures human or animal have cause to mourn the day of their births, Florita pauses her recitation at the precise point where lines of disquiet and acceptance balance against one another: "Yo a la sombra me siento, sobre el césped, y de hastío se llena mi mente, como si sintiese un aguijón. Y también: Y ya nada deseo y razón de llorar nunca he tenido. Y llegada a este punto, y después de respirar profundamente, Florita Almada decía que se podían sacar varias conclusiones. 1: que los pensamientos de un pastor pueden fácilmente desembocarse pues eso es parte de la naturaleza humana" (542).<sup>138</sup> Florita's deep sigh, her curtailment of the poem at this moment of relative gratitude and spent desire, and her dismissal of the shepherds' thoughts as deranged, all suggest that the night song's unremitting pessimism has worn even her endurance down, that those *y tambiénes* have added up as far as she can handle. In lieu of the poem's final strophe she offers three more "conclusions," each defensive in its own way:

2: que mirar cara a cara al aburrimiento era una acción que requería valor y que Benito Juárez lo había hecho y que ella también lo había hecho y que ambos habían visto en el rostro del aburrimiento cosas terribles que prefería no decir. 3: que el poema, ahora se acordaba, no hablaba de un pastor mexicano, sino de un pastor asiático, pero que el caso era lo mismo, pues los pastores son iguales en todas partes. 4: que si bien era cierto que al final de todos los afanes se abría un abismo inmenso, ella recomendaba, para empezar, dos cosas, la primera no engañar a la gente, y la segunda tratarla con corrección. A partir de ahí, se podía seguir hablando. Y eso era lo que ella hacía, escuchar y hablar... (ibid.)<sup>139</sup>

Florita's embrace of the poem and the truths about the night that she believes it captures is equivocal from the beginning—recall how the healer compares it to an "unknown disease" that seeps into our bloodstream unbeknownst to us—but her "conclusions" feel more like unwarranted supplements than readings conducted in good faith: Point 1, as mentioned above, is a categorical dismissal based on general human fallibility; 2 is a reaffirmation of her bravery and her bond to Benito Juárez paired with a refusal to gloss or expound the poem's words about boredom; the maxims of 4 not only don't follow from the poem, but the way that Florita marks them as the necessary preconditions for conversation suggest that she sees the poem as a dead

<sup>138</sup> "I sit on the grass, too, in the shade, but an anxiousness invades my mind as if a thorn is pricking me. And also: Yet I desire nothing, and till now I have no reason for complaint. And at this point, after sighing deeply, Florita Almada would say that several conclusions could be drawn: (1) that the thoughts that seize a shepherd can easily gallop away with him because it's human nature" (433)

<sup>139</sup> "(2) that facing boredom head-on was an act of bravery and Benito Juárez had done it and she had done it too and both had seen terrible things in the face of boredom, things she would rather not recall; (3) that the poem, now she remembered, was about an Asian shepherd, not a Mexica shepherd, but it made no difference, since shepherds are the same everywhere; (4) that if it was true that all effort led to a vast abyss, she had two recommendations to begin with, first, not to cheat people, and, second, to treat them properly. Beyond that, there was room for discussion. And that was what she did, listen and talk" (433)

end.<sup>140</sup> This sleight of hand might lead us to doubt Florita's earlier assertion that she could derive a lesson from any text and it might prompt us to see her injunction to never fool people as hypocritical, but it also serves as a testament to the power of the poem's deep pessimism. In the face of the anomie of "Crimes" and of *2666* as a whole, there *is* something noble about rejecting paralysis in the face of absurdity and behaving according to basic moral standards.<sup>141</sup> This is, after all, what Florita demands of the authorities and of her entire television audience when she has her vision of the femicides.

That demand, when it comes, is made with a combination of truculence and ingenuousness that's well worth dwelling on. At the point in her speech when Florita has established her maternal connection to the murdered girls by declaring them her daughters, she's possessed by an alternating sequence of voices, some expressive of macho rage—"La policía no hace nada, dijo tras unos segundos, con otro tono de voz, mucho más grave y varonil, los putos policías no hacen nada, sólo miran, ¿pero qué miran? ¿qué miran?" (547)<sup>142</sup>—others of conciliatory trust in authority: "Hay que romper el silencio, amigas. El licenciado José Andrés Briceño es un hombre bueno y cabal y no dejará en la impunidad tantos asesinatos" (ibid.).<sup>143</sup> Florita's dispositions here couldn't be more different in tone, but they're both in keeping with the deeply traditional values that she's championed throughout her story: the manly courage that she excoriates the police for lacking is what she exhibited when facing down boredom in the dark at night, and her praise of Briceño, the current governor of Sonora, is expressed in almost the exact same words as her praise for Benito Juárez—both men are *cabales*, perfectly fit leaders. And when Florita creates her audience here through a specific address, it's to her "amigas," to her fellow women, urging them on some level to seek the protection of men who will look out for them, and, in particular, the most vulnerable among them: "después dijo, con la voz bien timbrada: por lo menos podrían respetar a las vírgenes" (ibid.).<sup>144</sup> This jarring alternation of tone persists until the very end of her television appearance: she apologizes to the camera but not before thundering—it's here that she's described as "propiamente una erinia," a proper Fury—"¡no me toquen, putos insensibles! ¡No se preocupen por mí! ¿Es que no entienden de qué hablo?" (ibid.).<sup>145</sup> That slur *puto*, which shocks each time it drops from the mouth of this grandmotherly champion of all the world's dispossessed, whose most devoted surrogate child

<sup>140</sup> Conclusion 3 is trickier to encapsulate because it's difficult to tell what Florita's confusion and the suppression of Leopardi's name could signify. Writers' names and biographies are far more likely to appear throughout the text of *2666* than their actual words—the *Canto notturno* is, in fact, the only text quoted at any length in the novel's thousand pages—but it makes sense that Florita, who is not a part of any literary community, appreciates a text without really caring about its author. Her invocation of Leopardi's words without Leopardi couldn't be more different from the other Leopardian moment in Bolaño's fiction. In *Los sinsabores del verdadero policía*, that early version of so much of *2666*, the young Spanish poet Padilla, lover of that novel's proto-Amalfitano, conceives of a Hollywood-style Leopardi biopic and casts various figures from Spanish letters in the major roles: Vargas Llosa as the staid and reactionary father Count Montaldo, Javier Marías as Manzoni, etc. Certain poems are mentioned, the *Canto notturno* chief among them, but the passage mostly works as an elaborate mapping of the literary world of late twentieth-century Spain onto that of early nineteenth-century Italy (31-2).

<sup>141</sup> See Chris Andrews's final chapter, "A Sense of What Matters," for his argument that Bolaño consistently prizes a simple set of "minimalist" ethical principles (172ff.).

<sup>142</sup> "The police do nothing, they said after a few seconds, in a different voice, deeper and more masculine, the fucking police do nothing, they just watch, but what are they watching? what are they watching?" (437)

<sup>143</sup> "The silence must be broken, friends. José Andrés Briceño is a good man and a wise man and he won't so many killers go unpunished." (437)

<sup>144</sup> "Then she said, in a normal voice, can't they at least leave the virgins in peace?" (437)

<sup>145</sup> "Don't touch me, you cold-hearted wretches! Don't worry about me! Haven't you understood what I've said?" (437)

(and host on this occasion) is the gay television presenter Reinaldo, helps to bring out how, in “The Part About the Crimes,” even rank outsiders like Florita are shaped by the language of machismo.<sup>146</sup> And while the word certainly contains that hateful tinge it also shocks in a different way: by conveying an intemperate anger that shatters Florita’s careful self-presentation as a model of restraint.

Much like Elvira Campos doesn’t make a show of her expertise after her catalog of phobias, Florita never again holds forth the way she does in her first appearance on *Una hora con Reinaldo*. We learn of only one more TV appearance, which we’re told right away is “less spectacular” than the last, a kind of miniature version of the first in which Florita ruminates on upward social mobility, the vocation of teaching, dreams, and the many properties of iron, before, with humble apologies, beginning to wonder about the faces of authority figures:

Ese hierro bien bruñido me hace pensar, disculpen la digresión, decía Florita Almada, en las gafas de cristales negros de algunos dirigentes políticos o de algunos jefes sindicales o de algunos policías. ¿Para que se tapan los ojos, me pregunto? ¿Han pasado una mala noche estudiando formas para que el país progrese, para que los obreros tengan mayor seguridad en el trabajo o un aumento salarial, para que la delincuencia se bata en retirada? Puede ser. Yo no digo que no. Tal vez sus ojeras se deban a eso. ¿Pero que pasaría si yo me acercara a uno de ellos y le quitara las gafas y viera que *no tiene* ojeras? Me da miedo imaginármelo. Me da coraje. Mucho coraje, queridas amigas y amigos. (574).<sup>147</sup>

She goes on to say that what gives her even greater fear and anger are the visions she’s had about what’s happening to young women in Santa Teresa, “visiones que le cortarían el aliento al más macho de los machos” (575).<sup>148</sup> Though it’s difficult to gauge to what extent mordant irony has replaced credulity in Florita’s mind by this point, she’s clearly no longer counseling her audience to put its faith in the powers that be. The visions she’s had of the dead women have altered the confidence she once possessed that people fundamentally behave according to the basic moral principles of honesty and fairness that she posited as the necessary alternatives to the nihilism she detected in Leopardi. She even finds that she can’t hold to the basic routine that she’s cultivated over decades: “me quedo despierta hasta que amanece e intento leer y hacer algo útil y práctico, pero al final me siento a la mesa de la cocina y me pongo a darle vueltas a este problema” (ibid.).<sup>149</sup>

Which isn’t to say that she gives up on doing anything about the crimes. She leverages her modest fame in order to get a group of activists, the M.S.D.P., on Reinaldo’s show in order to talk about the impunity that’s “lived” in Santa Teresa, and when this lands Reinaldo into trouble

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<sup>146</sup> In the English translation, Natasha Wimmer understandably chooses not to translate the word “puto” in this charged way in this passage but thus detracts from some of its power to shock.

<sup>147</sup> “That makes me think, if you’ll pardon the digression, said Florita Almada, about the dark glasses worn by some of our political leaders or labor bosses or policemen. Why do they cover their eyes, I ask? Have they been up all night studying how to help the country advance, how to promise workers greater job security or pay raises, how to fight crime? Maybe so. It’s not for me to say otherwise. Maybe that’s why they have circles under their eyes. But what would happen if I went up to one of them and took off his glasses and saw that he *didn’t have* circles under his eyes? It frightens me to imagine it. It makes me angry. Very angry, dear friends.” (458)

<sup>148</sup> “visions that would take away the breath of the bravest of men” (459)

<sup>149</sup> “I stay up until dawn and I try to read and do something useful and practical, but in the end I sit down at the kitchen table and start to mull over the problem.” (459)

with his boss and he calls her up, she tells her adoptive son about a lovely dream she's just had: "Florita Almada habló de una lluvia de aerolitos en una playa de Sonora y describió a un niño parecido a él. ¿Y ese niño miraba caer a los aerolitos?, preguntó Reinaldo. Así es, dijo Florita Almada, miraba la lluvia de aerolitos mientras el mar le acariciaba las pantorrillas. Qué bonito, dijo Reinaldo. A mí también me lo pareció, dijo Florita Almada. Pero es que es muy bonito tu sueño, Florita, dijo Reinaldo. Sí dijo ella" (633).<sup>150</sup> This brief moment of connection and care is worth dwelling on because it captures Florita's saintliness better than any of the more general, more maudlin, statements we've heard about her up to this point.<sup>151</sup> The immediate context for this brief exchange about this dream is one of those stretches of "Crimes" that operates as a synecdoche for the novel as a whole: an unknown woman is dumped into a common grave, Florita brings the M.S.D.P. to TV, Reinaldo is lambasted by the head of his network and then has a conversation over the phone about a Keanu Reeves movie about a serial killer of homosexuals in which his interlocutor demands that he read J.D. Salinger, he calls Florita and hears about her dream, we get a census of the various characters, Elvira Campos among them, who see Florita's appearance and either choose to discuss it with someone—Elvira tells Juan de Dios about it, not—the narco Don Pedro Rengifo watches it in silence with his bodyguard—and then the incarcerated Klaus Haas, who's told about the show and brushes it off, warns his prison toadies that someone far worse than himself or any serial killer is making his way to Santa Teresa. It's telling that Florita's exchange with Reinaldo about her dream takes up roughly the same amount of space in the text as the account of her joint TV appearance with the M.S.D.P. The small, good thing she's able to do for Reinaldo in the intimacy of a late-night phone conversation matters as much as the attention she can bring to the crimes via a mass medium. And while the broadcast reaches a number of the characters we've been introduced to so far, all the novel does is register whether it prompted these viewers to speak to those closest to them: no further action is taken by anybody, no larger movement is sparked.

Indeed, that's the last we really hear of Florita's television appearances. The next and final time we encounter her it's because the journalist Sergio González Rodríguez seeks her out. By this point Florita seems to be in hiding: Reinaldo makes it clear to Sergio that he and his fellow disciples jealously guard her privacy. We've already noted Sergio's skepticism upon first meeting Florita, his sense that she's hard- rather than softhearted, but it's hard to overstate just how baffling a figure this veteran crime reporter finds the seer to be. He's disconcerted by everything about her, not only by her calling him *hijito* but by the hieratic mystique that her protectors accord to her and, above all, by the cryptic answers she gives to his questions about the murders, answers that constitute her final words in the novel. These answers work together to present the murderers she sees in her visions (the murders are all she has visions of by this point) as being outlandish and, quite literally, larger than life. Their faces are "big"—"como hinchadas,

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<sup>150</sup> "Florita Almada talked about a meteor shower on a beach in Sonora and described a boy who looked like him. And that boy was watching the falling stars? asked Reinaldo. That's right, said Florita Almada, he was watching them fall as the waves lapped his shins. What a nice dream, said Reinaldo. I thought so too, said Florita Almada." (506)

<sup>151</sup> See, by way of contrast, the following tranche of commercial verbiage from Florita's first appearance which appears in between her recitation of the Leopardi poem and her vision of the dead women: "la Santa comprende mejor que nadie a los desventurados de Hermosillo, la Santa tiene feeling con los heridos, con los niños sensibles y maltratados, con los que han sido violados y humillados, con los que son objeto de chistes y risas, para todos tiene una palabra amable, un consejo práctico, los risonos se sienten como divas cuando ellas les habla, los zafarinfas se sienten sensatos, los gordos adelgazan, los enfermos de sida sonríen. Así que Florita Almada, tan querida, no tardó muchos años en aparecer en un programa de televisión..." (543).

como infladas. ¿Cómo máscaras? Yo no diría eso, dijo Florita, son caras, no máscaras ni disfraces, sólo que están hinchadas, como si tomaran demasiada cortisona” (714)<sup>152</sup>—and so are their feelings:

Todo el mundo, cuando habla, deja traslucir, aunque sea en parte, sus alegrías y sus penas, ¿verdad?... Pues cuando esas figuraciones mías hablaban entre ellos, pese a no entender sus palabras, me daba perfecta cuenta de que sus alegrías y sus penas eran *grandes*, dijo Florita. ¿Qué tan grandes?, dijo Sergio. Florita lo miró a los ojos. Abrió la puerta. pudo sentir la noche de Sonora tocándole la espalda como un fantasma. *Inmensas*, dijo Florita. ¿Cómo si se supieran impunes? No, no, no, dijo Florita, aquí no tiene nada que ver la impunidad. (715, italics in the original)<sup>153</sup>

Why is impunity—one of the watchwords of the activists she brought to Reinaldo’s show—irrelevant to Florita by this point? The “here” that she’s talking about is left profoundly ambiguous in scope: she could be merely referring to what’s behind the outsize emotions of the men she sees in her visions or to her description thereof, but then again she could be making a larger claim about how the utter lack of censure or punishment for evil actions in Santa Teresa (Sonora? Mexico?) has become so complete that impunity is no longer relevant. A juridical category is obviated by an ontological evil.

The categorical assurance with which Florita offers this parting statement—our surrogate Sergio is being ushered out the door as she says it—is also noteworthy. Florita has always carefully qualified the claims she made on behalf of the fidelity and completeness of her visions. One of the first things we see her say during her introductory monologue is that her “visions” are less, well, visual than auditory: “ella a veces no veía nada, las imágenes eran borrosas, el sonido defectuoso, como si la antena que le había crecido en el cerebro estuviera mal puesta o la hubieran agujereado en una balacera o fuera de papel de aluminio y el viento hiciera con ella lo que le venía la gana” (535).<sup>154</sup> And in her second TV appearance she emphasizes the fragmentary nature of her dreams: “en sueños veo los crímenes y es como un aparato de televisión explotara y siguiera viendo, en los trocitos de pantalla esparcidos por mi dormitorio, escenas horribles, llantos que no acaban nunca” (575).<sup>155</sup> At the time of Sergio’s visit she remains a cautious spectator, unwilling to declare the men she sees as healthy or to identify the strange language she hears them speaking in (“en este mundo nadie sabe nada a ciencia cierta, hijito”), but she sounds absolutely certain about the cartoonish largeness of their faces and, especially—“hay algo que sí entiendo”<sup>156</sup> she says, by way of introducing this last subject—about the immensity of the joy and sorrow that they feel. She thus exits *2666* in a way reminiscent of Jean-Claude Pelletier,

<sup>152</sup> “Like masks? I wouldn’t say that, said Florita; they’re faces; not masks or disguises, they’re just swollen, as if the killers were taking too much cortisone”(571)

<sup>153</sup> “When a person speaks, his joys and sorrows shine through, even if only in part, wouldn’t you say?... Well, when these figments of mine speak among themselves, even though I don’t understand their words, I can tell for a fact that their joys and sorrows are *big*, said Florita. How big? asked Sergio. Florita fixed him with her gaze. She opened the door. He could feel the Sonora night brushing his back like a ghost. *Huge*, said Florita. As if they know they’re beyond the law? No, no, no, said Florita, it has nothing to do with the law.” (572)

<sup>154</sup> “Sometimes she didn’t see anything, the picture was fuzzy, the sound faulty, as if the antenna that had sprung up in her brain wasn’t installed right or had been shot full of holes or was made of aluminum foil and blew every which way in the wind” (427)

<sup>155</sup> “In dream I see the crimes and it’s as if a television set had exploded and I keep seeing, in the little shards of screen scattered around my bedroom, horrible scenes, endless tears.” (459)

<sup>156</sup> “One thing I do understand” (572)



who, as we saw in Chapter 1, concludes that he and Espinoza will never get closer to Archiboldi but that he is definitely present somewhere nearby in Santa Teresa.

Like those critics, and like Elvira Campos, Florita has been changed by the force of the crimes. She goes from exhibiting iron self-assurance to confessing to radical doubt. The small cult she's gathered round herself seems to be about as sustaining as the friendship between the two Archiboldians or Elvira's doomed relationship with Juan de Dios. In all of those cases, conviviality and generosity at the intimate level matter; they are what the novel offers us, along with literary communion, as an antidote to the violence that abounds in a borderland like Santa Teresa and that extends to a metropolis like London.

But a true confrontation with the source of that violence is again imagined as an encounter with a single, monstrous individual. Having found a receptive audience for her self-help advice at an age where she's no longer an object of sexual desire, *la Santa* Florita appears more open to using mainstream modes of organization than *la doctora* Campos. But her very final words, about the men with puffy faces and immense emotions, feel as perplexed and resigned as Elvira's dream of escape. She can't tell Sergio González anything specific about who the murders are, but she's convinced of the sheer magnitude of their capacity to feel.

### **The Avenging Angel Azucena Esquivel Plata**

It's one of the great ironies of *2666* that the character who best expresses its thoroughgoing cynicism towards established political power is its sole politician. Azucena Esquivel Plata brings "The Part About the Crimes" and the novel's central, multi-part sojourn in Mexico to a close by summoning Sergio González and, in the grand tradition of the novel's other great speakers, setting this one investigator straight about what's happening in Santa Teresa and demanding that she help him with a very specific task. In contradistinction to Florita Almada's capacious interest in the crimes, to all those daughters the seer feels she's losing, Esquivel Plata—the redoubtable congresswoman ought to be referred to by both her last names—is invested in the femicides because of one person and one person alone: her childhood friend Kelly Rivera Parker. Elvira Campos's story is told in tandem with that of her romantic partner Juan de Dios Martínez, and Florita Almada comes to occupy the center of a family-like cult. Azucena Esquivel Plata's central attachment, the relationship that she herself places at the center of her own biography, is with Kelly.

In fact, once Sergio González is brought by limousine to the congresswoman's grand Mexico City house and taken in the Tamayos and Orozcós hanging on its walls, his hostess's first order of business is to discuss Kelly:

Ha oído usted hablar de Kelly Rivera Parker? No, dijo Sergio. Me lo temía, dijo la diputada. ¿De mí ha oído usted hablar? Claro, dijo Sergio. ¿Pero no de Kelly? No, dijo Sergio. Así es este puto país, dijo Azucena, y durante unos minutos permaneció en silencio, mirando el vaso de tequila al trasluz de una lámpara de mesa o mirando el suelo o con los ojos cerrados, porque todo eso, y más, podía hacer bajo la impunidad de sus gafas. (733)<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> Here, it's worth noting, we have one of the shades-wearing people who Florita informs us run Mexico. "Have you heard of Kelly Rivera Parker? No, said Sergio, I was afraid of that, said the congresswoman. Have you heard of me? Of course, said Sergio. But not of Kelly? No, said Sergio. That's this fucking country for you, said

It is, on the face of it, ridiculous for Azucena to expect Sergio to have heard of her private-citizen friend and to consider it some sort of indictment of Mexico as a whole that he hasn't. We've been told, after all that Azucena is *sui generis*: just by hearing her voice during her unsolicited phone call, Sergio is able to identify her as the most notorious woman in Mexican politics:

No podía ser más que Azucena Esquivel Plata, la María Félix de la política mexicana, la más-más, la Dolores del Río del PRI, la Tongolele de la lascivia de algunos diputados y de casi todos los periodistas políticos mayores de cincuenta años, más bien cercanos a los sesenta, que se hundían como caimanes en el pantano, más mental que real, regentado, algunos decían que inventado, por Azucena Esquivel Plata. (729)<sup>158</sup>

So why does this singularly scandalous figure, part movie star and part Gorgon-like swamp monster, suggest that her friend should be as infamous as she is? On one level this is a tribute that Azucena is paying to the missing, and most likely dead, Kelly, but on another it's a testament to how the famous woman saw her comparatively unknown friend as a better, purer version of herself. Azucena became so attached to Kelly as a girl because she saw how completely her friend embodied the willfulness and intransigence that she would come to place at the heart of her self-understanding.

The class and national dimensions of this self-identification are worth examining. Azucena's monologue eventually becomes an indictment of the political establishment she belongs to but at its outset, when she's introducing herself and Kelly to Sergio, she avows a deep belief in a kind of aristocratic superiority that she defines with the word "class." She talks about her family's disdain for anyone who doesn't belong to the old creole elite ("para mi familia, sépalo usted, los mexicanos de verdad éramos muy pocos. Trescientas familias en todo el país. El resto eran indios rencorosos o blancos resentidos o seres violentos venidos de no sé dónde para llevar a México a la ruina" (739)<sup>159</sup>—Kelly's "social climber" architect father very much included. The young, relative outsider Kelly, however, stands out to Azucena for her discerning "taste," specifically, for her preference for the Esquivel Plata's old house over her own. Kelly's parents might live in modern comfort but Azucena's home, the very place where the congresswoman tells her long story to the journalist, is the repository of a tradition worth preserving:

[esta casa,] mucho más descuidada de como está ahora, [era] un caserón que olía a momias y a velas, más que una casa una capilla gigantesca, pero en donde estaban presentes los atributos de la riqueza y de la permanencia de México. Una casa sin estilo, en ocasiones fea como un barco hundido, pero con clase. ¿Y sabe lo que es tener clase?

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Azucena, and for a few minutes she was silent, gazing at her glass of tequila, shot through by the light of a table lamp. or staring at the floor with her eyes closed, because she could do all of that, and more, under cover of her glasses." (587)

<sup>158</sup> "It could only be Azucena Esquivel Plata, the María Félix of Mexican politics, the grand dame, the Dolores del Río of the PRI, the Tongolele of the lustful fantasies of some congressmen and nearly every political reporter over fifty, or actually closer to sixty, all of them sinking like crocodiles in the swamp, more mental than real, presided over—some might say invented—by Azucena Esquivel Plata." (584)

<sup>159</sup> "In my family's view, I can tell you, real Mexicans were few and far between. Three hundred families in the whole country. The rest were embittered Indians or resentful whites or violent people come from who knows where to destroy Mexico." (592)

Ser, en última instancia, soberano. No deberle nada a nadie. Y así era Kelly. No quiero decir que ella tuviera consciencia de eso. Ni yo. Las dos éramos unas niñas y éramos simples y complicadas como niñas y no nos enredábamos con palabras. pero ella era así. Pura voluntad, pura explosión, puro deseo de placer. ¿Tiene usted hijas? No, dijo Sergio. Ni hijas ni hijos. Bueno, si tiene alguna vez hijas sabrá de lo que le hablo. La diputada guardó silencio durante un rato. Yo sólo he tenido un hijo, dijo. Vive en los Estados Unidos, está estudiando. A veces me gustaría que no volviera a México jamás. Creo que sería mejor para él. (740-1)<sup>160</sup>

The tragic essence of Mexican identity, the sovereignty of the will in childhood, the relationship between parents and children: this passage takes up several themes that we've encountered before in this chapter. One of the things that's remarkable about it is the way that it threads together Azucena's deep disillusionment in the idea of Mexico with her abiding love and admiration for her friend. Azucena's devotion to Kelly has clearly endured unabated over the course of her life while her appreciation of her country—precisely one of the values that drew her to the young Kelly in the first place—has dwindled to the point where she suspects it might be best for her son to abandon Mexico altogether. It's also worth noting that Azucena specifically asks Sergio whether he has daughters, not sons. It suggests that she sees the willfulness, the "sovereignty," that she so values as a gendered virtue, or, at least, a trait that's more common in a girl or woman. Her remark that she's "only" had a son reads as more than just a factual accounting, it feels like an admission of a kind of disappointment in never having had a daughter through whom she could relive what she and Kelly shared when they were young and whom she could raise to be as rebellious as she herself was.

Because a thoroughgoing refusal of what was expected of her is what Azucena practiced, by her own account. She becomes the first woman in her family to attend a university ("probablemente me dejaron seguir estudiando porque los amenacé con matarme si no me dejaban") and achieves a new sense of clarity about what she needs to do:

Ahí me di cuenta de que si quería seguir viva, quiero decir seguir viva como lo que era, como Azucena Esquivel Plata, tenía que dar un giro de ciento ochenta grados a mis prioridades... En mi naturaleza no estaba, como puede usted suponer, ni languidecer ni morirme. Me gustaba demasiado la vida. Me gustaba lo que la vida me podía ofrecer a mí, a nadie más que a mí, y que yo, además, estaba segura de merecer. (744)<sup>161</sup>

<sup>160</sup> "This very house, although of course not as well kept as it is now, a big, rambling house that smelled of mummies and candles, more like a giant chapel than a house, but with all the attributes of Mexican wealth and permanence. It was a house with no style, sometimes as ugly as a sunken ship, but it had class. And do you know what it means to have class? To be, in the last instance, a sovereign entity. Not to owe anything to anyone. Not to have to make explanations to anyone. And that was Kelly. I don't mean she was conscious of that. Nor was I. The two of us were children and as children we were simple and complicated and we didn't get tangled up in words. But that was how she was. Pure will, pure explosive force, pure thirst for pleasure. Do you have daughters? No, said Sergio. No sons and no daughters. Well, if you ever have daughters you'll know what I mean. The congresswoman was silent for a while. I have just one child, a son, she said. He's in school in the United States. Sometimes I hope he never comes back to Mexico. I think that would be best for him." (593)

<sup>161</sup> "That was when I realized that if I wanted to keep living, that is, to keep living as who I was, as Azucena Esquivel Plata, I had to shift my priorities one hundred and eighty degrees, priorities that up until then hadn't differed substantially from my family's... It wasn't in my nature, as you might suppose, to languish or expire. I liked life too much. I liked what life had to offer me, and me alone, and I was convinced I deserved every bit of it." (596)

For all that she asserts her sense of possessing a singular destiny in moments like this one, Azucena keeps returning to her high-class origins as the determining cause in how she's treated. She's nonplussed that her university professors like her so much until she's able to explain their affection as a manifestation of their particularly Mexican sentimentality (ibid.). When she takes up with leftist radicals, she ascribes their desire for her to their "supine stupidity," their sense that sleeping with her had some sort of revolutionary significance: "como si el acto de poseer a una mujer como yo equivaliera a tomar el Palacio de Invierno. ¡Ellos que no son capaces ni de cortar el césped de la Dacha de Verano!" (750).<sup>162</sup> Sovereignty is indeed what Azucena values above all: she appreciates the freedom that the lords of the *ancien régime* possessed while denigrating that era's religious trappings and any sense whatsoever of *noblesse oblige*. Gleefully assuming her role as a "monster of leadership" she tells her family that she'll sleep with whomever she wants, that she'll break the sacrament of marriage if she chooses to, and that she won't tolerate their weaknesses any longer: "Les dije que se había acabado el tiempo de las beaterías y del chingaueditismo. Les dije que no iba a tolerar más maricones en la familia" (751).<sup>163</sup>

The only family that Azucena recognizes and pledges fealty to is Kelly. Without ever coming right out and saying it, Azucena suggests that she and her friend are more macho than any of the powerful men they encounter, whether as lovers—Kelly is praised for her "irreproachable independence" when it comes to men (760), and not one of either woman's partners, not even Azucena's husband, is worthy of even being named in this monologue—or as friends and partners in arms: Kelly alone believes that friendship is "sacred" and stands by Azucena when she crosses over from the Left to the PRI while the rest of her colleagues disavow her and work to undermine her: "se pusieron a hablar de mí a mis espaldas. Este país de machos, como usted bien sabe, siempre ha estado lleno de maricones. De lo contrario no se explica la historia de México" (760-1).<sup>164</sup>

As she enters the ruling party and achieves a false sense of power, Azucena's triumphal narrative takes a very dark turn. She marks the inflection point herself in her sardonic description of the curdling of her political idealism:

Aquí viene la parte más divertida. La parte más increíble de la historia (y me da lo mismo que sea la historia de nuestro triste México o de nuestra triste Latinoamérica). Aquí viene la parte in-cre-í-ble. Cuando uno comete errores desde adentro, los errores pierden su significado. Los errores dejan de ser errores. Los errores, los cabezazos en el muro, se convierten en virtudes políticas, en contingencias políticas, en *presencia* política, en puntos mediáticos a tu favor. (761; italics in the original)<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> "As if the act of possessing a woman like me were the equivalent of storming the Winter Palace. The Winter Palace! They, who couldn't even cut the grass of the Summer Dacha!" (600)

<sup>163</sup> "I told them the time for pieties and mealy-mouthed platitudes was over. I told them I wasn't going to stand for any more limp wrists in the family." (601)

<sup>164</sup> "still talked, but mostly behind my back. As you're well aware, this is a macho country full of faggots. The history of Mexico wouldn't make sense otherwise." (609)

<sup>165</sup> "But here comes the funniest part. The really unbelievable part of the story (the sad story of Mexico or Latin America, it makes no difference). The part you can't *believe*. When you make mistakes from inside, the mistakes stop mattering. Mistakes stop being mistakes. Making a mistake, butting your head against the wall, becomes a political virtue, a political tactic, gives you political *presence*, gets you media attention." (609)

Azucena was never a wide-eyed idealist but the disappointment she feels upon entering the charmed circle of power and realizing that it turns (what we can only assume are moral) failures into victories is nevertheless palpable. The neutralization of her project for reform—she insists that she entered the PRI because she wanted the power to improve her country—which she presents as being paradigmatic for her country, even her continent, coincides with her elevation to a new level of fame (“dejé de ser conocida y me hice famosa” (ibid.))<sup>166</sup> and a whole raft of tasks that she considers to be meaningless but that she completes out of a strange compulsion.

While Azucena identifies her ascendance in the PRI as the consummation of her disappointment, the real tragedy in her life only arrives later, when Kelly disappears in Santa Teresa. For all of Azucena’s bluster about not having any regrets, the way she tells the story of Kelly’s disappearance, with its focus on how her various political commitments lead her to drift away from her friend (765), her doubts and “shivered premonitions” about Kelly’s new business venture—she goes from arranging fashion shows to planning glamorous parties in the provinces—(766-7), and her inability to get Kelly to divulge the nature of the mess she’s gotten herself into in the last phone call they ever share (768), suggests that she feels responsible for her friend’s grim fate. As we see time and again in *2666*, a disappearance in Santa Teresa brings a broad-strokes biographical narrative into focus. In keeping with her self-conception as a woman of action, Azucena heads straight for Santa Teresa in order to investigate her friend’s disappearance. Early on in her investigation she learns that the banker that Kelly was working for at the time of her disappearance had deep ties to both the PRI and to the Santa Teresa cartel, and that knowledge drives her to assume an oppositional stance to the entire political establishment she’d worked so hard to entrench herself in. She sizes up the Santa Teresa authorities, finds them as contemptible and corrupt as readers of “Crimes” have long know them to be, and soon realizes that she needs to turn to other relative outsiders in her quest to avenge her friend. The remainder of her story, which brings this longest section of *2666* to a close, involves Azucena’s discovery of the magnitude of the sordid world that swallowed up Kelly through the work of Luis Miguel Loya, a meticulous, fiendishly competent detective—*el verdadero policía*, we could call him, quoting the title of one of Bolaño’s other posthumous novels—and her revelation to Sergio González that she has hired him to expose this world by writing about it.

There is a curious public-private split in Azucena’s crusade that brings into focus the way that she prioritizes her personal injury over the larger tragedy of the murdered women. At the very outset of her quest, indignant that none of the Santa Teresa authorities told her about the “lamentable cases” of the dead women, she calls a press conference to make her commitment to finding out the truth about Kelly’s disappearance: “dije que como política y feminista, además de como amiga, no iba a cejar en mi empeño de llegar hasta el descubrimiento de la verdad. Para mis adentros pensaba: no saben con quién se han metido, bola de cobardes, se van a mear los pantalones” (776).<sup>167</sup> This disjunction between public poise and assurance and private rage and despair only intensifies with time:

Durante dos años tuve a Loya trabajando en el caso. Durante dos años tuve tiempo para forjar una imagen que poco a poco fue calando en los medios de comunicación: la de la mujer sensibilizada contra la violencia, la de la mujer que representaba el cambio en el

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<sup>166</sup> “I went from being well-known to being famous” (609)

<sup>167</sup> “I said that as a politician and feminist, as well as a friend, I would be unflagging in my determination to uncover the truth. Inside I thought: you don’t know whom you’ve crossed you pack of cowards, you’re going to piss your pants.” (621)

seno del partido, no sólo un cambio generacional sino también un cambio de actitud, una visión abierta y no dogmática de la realidad mexicana. En realidad, yo sólo ardía de rencor por la desaparición de Kelly, por la broma macabra de la que había sido objeto. Cada vez me importaba menos la consideración que podía lograr en lo que llamamos el público, los votantes, a quienes en el fondo no veía o si veía, de forma accidental o episódica, despreciaba. A medida que conocía otros casos, sin embargo, a medida que oía otras voces, mi rabia fue adquiriendo una estatura, digamos, de masa, mi rabia se hizo colectiva o expresión de algo colectivo, mi rabia, cuando se dejaba contemplar, se veía a si misma como el brazo vengador de miles de víctimas. Sinceramente, creo que me estaba volviendo loca. Esas voces que escuchaba (voces, nunca rostros o bultos) provenían del desierto. En el desierto yo vagaba con un cuchillo en la mano. En la hoja del cuchillo se reflejaba mi rostro. Tenía el pelo blanco y los pómulos como chupados y cubiertos de pequeñas cicatrices. Cada cicatriz era una pequeña historia que me esforzaba vanamente por recordar. (782-3)<sup>168</sup>

From Elvira Campos's dream of escape through mummification through Florita Almada's temporary transformation into a Fury we arrive at Azucena Esquivel Plata's sense that she needs to become a monster to combat monsters. More explicitly than in any of the other unreal figures in *2666*, her sense of becoming supernatural is tied to her desire to represent others, to channel a collectivity. The woman who's most brazenly spoken of a strict hierarchy between classes of people is driven to a kind of collective consciousness by her capacity to connect her own suffering at the loss of her great friend with the suffering of others.

But in what can only feel like a kind of anti-climax, or at least a comedown from the vision of being a rough beast who can mobilize for what's right, Azucena feels that the decisive blow she can strike can only come through writing. She believes that the reciprocal violence she can unleash on the criminals who took her friend from her can only come through the solitary journalist: she'll give him the real target, the place where he can strike cleanly against the enemy: "Quiero que escriba sobre esto, que siga escribiendo sobre esto. He leído sus artículos. Pero a menudo golpea allí donde sólo hay aire. Yo quiero que golpee sobre seguro, sobre carne humana, sobre carne impune y no sobre sombras. Quiero que vaya a Santa Teresa y la huela bien. Quiero que la muerda" (789).<sup>169</sup> Institutions may have failed her and the women of Santa Teresa completely but Azucena knows that what she's discovered while carrying out her very personal vendetta, and the Sherlockian competence of her true policeman Loya, will allow González Rodríguez to make life hell for the victimizers. Azucena's section ends with a vision of

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<sup>168</sup> "For two years I had Loya on the case. Over those two years I had time to craft an image that little by little began filtering into the media: of a woman sensitive to violence, a woman who represented change in the heart of the party, not just generational change but a change in attitude, with a view of Mexican reality that was open-minded, not dogmatic. Really, I was just burning with rage at Kelly's disappearance, at the macabre joke made at her expense. I cared less and less about the opinion of what we call the public, my constituents, whom I didn't truly see, or if I did see, accidentally or sporadically, I despised. As I learned about other cases, however, as I heard other voices, my rage began to assume what you might call mass stature, my rage became collective or the expression of something collective, my rage, when it allowed itself to show, saw itself as the instrument of vengeance of thousands of victims. Honestly, I think I was losing my mind. Those voices I heard (voices, never faces or shapes) came from the desert. In the desert, I roamed with a knife in my hand. My face was reflected on the blade. I had white hair and sunken cheeks covered with tiny scars. Each scar was a little story that I tried and failed to recall." (626)

<sup>169</sup> "I want you to write about this, to keep writing about this. I've read your articles. They're good, but too often you pull your punches. I want you to strike hard, strike human flesh, unassailable flesh, no shadows. I want you to go to Santa Teresa and to sniff around. I want you to sink in your teeth." (631)

action that is simultaneously solitary and collaborative: “Ahora quiero que usted utilice todo lo que entre Loya y yo reunimos y que agite el avispero. Por supuesto, no va a estar solo. Yo estaré siempre a su lado, aunque usted no me vea, para ayudarlo en cada momento” (790).<sup>170</sup>

This, as much as anything in *2666*, suggests how completely institutional and political solutions simply aren't open for any of the novel's characters. Azucena is the novel's most public figure but when it comes to striking back against the killers she can only ask for a journalist to reveal the vast web of complicity in the crimes. The woman beholden to no man, who fears no one, is forced to become the secret sharer in the project closest to her heart. As a woman who feels the weight of the violence done to her fellow women and who dreams of being an avenging figure wandering through desert wastes with a knife in her hand, she still feels compelled to pass the information on to a man who doesn't have the public profile that she does. As in all of Bolaño's fiction, hope and redemption can only be carried out by someone un- or underappreciated. Azucena tells Sergio that she's read all of his work and that that's why she trusts that he can fulfil her brief.

Indeed, the mystique of concealment is directly invoked here at the very end of Azucena's narrative. Sergio asks her about the detective Loya and she replies that he has died. It turns out that he'd conducted his investigation of Kelly's case while slowly dying from cancer. An immensely private man who only reveals his illness to his client in his final months, Loya is nevertheless granted a presence in the novel through Azucena's description of his apartment, which she visited one time and which she describes to Sergio late in the speech in which she commissions him to strike with his writing. Azucena surmises that the apartment, nondescript on the outside, served as a “mirror” or “unfinished self-portrait” of Loya on the inside: “Tenía muchos discos y libros de arte. Las puertas eran blindadas. Tenía la foto de una mujer mayor en un marco de oro, un gesto más bien melodramático. La cocina estaba completamente reformada y era grande y llena de utensilios de cocinero profesional” (790).<sup>171</sup>

He may not be one of the ordinary victims, but this catalog of Loya's remaining possessions after his death from cancer gives him the status of one of those many characters who remain just outside the frame of the novel. Their actions are recounted secondhand but they are only made present to us through the traces they leave behind. Azucena is convinced that the work he did for and with her will arm Sergio González Rodríguez with the information he needs to take down the vague “them” responsible for the catastrophe of Santa Teresa, but even as she turns to the journalist, she makes it clear that she must remain invisible to him as he writes his exposé. Once again, there is cooperation without shared presence; there is an interview in which a life's work and gained wisdom is passionately recounted but the real work is yet to be done.

This is all representative of the persistent strategy of tantalizing us that Bolaño deploys throughout *2666*. The crimes are mostly completed once we receive the ghastly details, and the plans for fighting or escaping the horror are deferred beyond the edge of the page. Instead of hearing about what might become of the book Esquivel Plata entrusts to González, we turn the page and begin the story of how little Hans Reiter became Archiboldi. In other words, we're presented a novel-length origin story for one of those monstrous individuals who appears tremendous to those who encounter him but whose exact part in the femicides of Santa Teresa is

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<sup>170</sup> “I want you to use everything Loya and I gathered between us and stir up the hive. Naturally, you won't be alone. I'll be with you always, though you can't see me, helping you every step of the way.” (632)

<sup>171</sup> “He had lots of records and art books. The doors were armored. He had a photograph of an older woman in a gold frame, a melodramatic touch. The kitchen was completely redone and it was big and full of professional kitchen gadgets.” (632)

left wholly untold. In the end, *2666* is not focused on narrating that violence as it happens but in telling the stories of how people engage with it on a subjective level.

In the case of “The Part About the Crimes,” the people who are most dramatically “conscientized” by the experience of living amidst the femicides are the women whose stories we’ve tracked so closely. They may each be unlike one another and unlike the young victims of most of the crimes in significant ways but having all been relegated to the bottom of a hierarchy by the patriarchal system, they all exhibit moments of appearing larger, and stranger, than life, monsters who can stand against the “gigantic” killers who commit the rapes and murders outside the novel’s purview. In the end, these righteous monsters can’t come together to mount any kind of concerted challenge to the system that’s turned Santa Teresa into a hellscape, but the mosaic of their stories evokes the possibility of not simply being cowed or rendered helpless.



### Chapter 3: Everything in Anything

#### Barry Seaman's Brief Compendium

Having explored how *2666* is formed through the coming together of various far-flung individuals, we can now turn to the other element that the novel consistently gathers together: the stray fact. It's not just the novel's florid, oracular speakers from Amalfitano to Florita Almada who work them into their performances; virtually every minor character smuggles one or two into the narrative, and they show up across every part from "Critics" to "Archimboldi," which closes the novel of novels with a micro-biography of a curious German nobleman.<sup>172</sup> In order to lay out the role that (small-c) catholic facts play in the novel's depiction of what survival and human connection look like in a horrific world of hierarchy and domination, I want to begin by looking at one of the book's most perfect synecdoches, a sermon preached by Barry Seaman, a fictionalized version of the Black Panther Party founder Bobby Seale. Seaman's speech enters *2666* because it is witnessed by Oscar Fate, the young black American journalist who at this moment has yet to travel to Santa Teresa. Here is Jean Franco's précis:

[Fate] goes to hear Seaman preach in a [Detroit] church a sermon that is a strange mixture of reminiscences of the other founder of the Panthers, Marius Newell, followed by ruminations on money and on utility and even a recipe for cooking Brussels sprouts. Seaman's reminiscences and advice seem to represent the unclassifiable knowledge that accumulates over a lifetime, including all kinds of unpacked items that may be meaningless to others. (*Cruel Modernity*, 237)

Franco gets it about half right. It's true that Seaman's prodigious store of knowledge has come together over the course of his long and heroic life but one of the things that makes his sermon so striking is he makes a forceful, explicit attempt to classify his knowledge. These are his first quoted words: "Voy a tratar cinco temas, dijo Seaman, ni uno más ni uno menos. El primer tema es PELIGRO. El segundo, DINERO. El tercero, COMIDA. El cuarto, ESTRELLAS. El quinto y último, UTILIDAD" (312-13).<sup>173</sup> Indeed, Seaman's sermon is presented as five unbroken blocks of text, each preceded by one of these capitalized words. Though it's clearly a speech presented to a live audience, on the page it looks more than a little like a miniature reference book, like a dictionary or an encyclopedia. In fact, I'd like to argue that the encyclopedism of Seaman's speech extends beyond this formal similarity to its dense content itself. For all of his insistence that he's sticking to five topics, Seaman takes on many more, and he does so in a way that captures the essence of *2666*'s own version of encyclopedism in all its informality, its serendipity, and its grounding in biographical fact.

Facts and books matter in Bolaño's fictional universe insofar as they connect to individual lives and allow otherwise disparate individuals to connect to one another. The people who speak up for the indiscriminate reading of whatever is at hand are people like Seaman and Florita Almada who don't have access to schools or libraries and who thus have to sift through vast quantities of material to find something worthwhile. After long stints in isolation these

<sup>172</sup> I analyze the closing Fürst Pückler scene below.

<sup>173</sup> "I'm going to address five subjects. The first subject is DANGER. The second, MONEY. The third, FOOD. The fourth, STARS. The fifth and last, USEFULNESS." (246)

heroic converts to reading—both of them arrive at their autodidacticism as adults—discover audiences in the places most brutally blighted by the new global capitalist order—post-industrial Detroit and neo-industrial Sonora—and they feel compelled to impart ethical lessons about eating right and about reading, activities they both present as salvific and transformative.

But why should encyclopedism be the rubric under which to consider these characters' ethical discourses? On one level, their deeply personal, indiscriminate and contingent reading is fundamentally opposed to the collaborative projects that yield literal encyclopedias. In fact, classical encyclopedic discourse is presented as an integral part of this kind of new personalized encyclopedism. Before he sets out to give his sermon, Seaman is observed by Fate at his writing desk with several full file-folders and three “very thick” books: three dictionaries and “un mamotreto que se llamaba *La enciclopedia francesa abreviada*, del que [Fate] nunca había oído hablar ni en la universidad ni en toda su vida” (310).<sup>174</sup> Fate's dismissal of this book—which may or may not be an anthology drawn from the eighteenth-century Diderot-d'Alembert *Encyclopédie*; it's unclear—is in keeping with the broader skepticism of this cynical young man who's torn up by the death of his mother and who feels like he's pursuing meaningless journalistic work for a publication he doesn't believe in. (Fate's and Seaman's relationships to a specifically black culture and politics—the magazine Fate writes for is a Harlem-based outfit named *Amanecer Negro*—are topics I'll return to.) The dissociation of the book from Fate's formal schooling feels important, too: this “mamotreto,” this unseemly curio, can't have anything to do with formal schooling if it's to be pure grist for the autodidact's mill.

In his sermon itself, Seaman doesn't cite these reference books explicitly—again, the protocols of formal scholarship are wholly foreign to his practice—but he does enthusiastically recommend a book with direct ties to the *Encyclopédie*. These are the words that conclude the fifth and final part of the sermon, the part about “UTILIDAD,” which has been largely devoted to Seaman's implacable prison reading and to the unconditional usefulness of reading in general:

Y vosotros, que sois tan amables, ahora os estaréis preguntando: ¿qué era los que leías, Barry? Lo leía todo. Pero sobre todo recuerdo un libro que leí en uno de los momentos más desesperados de mi vida y que me devolvió la serenidad. ¿Qué libro es ése? Pues es un libro que se llama *Compendio abreviado de la obra de Voltaire* y les aseguro que es muy útil o al menos para mí fue de gran utilidad. (326)<sup>175</sup>

The qualified endorsement on which he ends says a lot about Seaman's form of moralism and commitment to reading whatever is at hand. Like most reading recommendations in Bolaño's fiction—and there are *many*—this one is an unelaborated-upon assertion, a mere *read this* without explanation. Seaman says nothing about the dark time he was going through when he happened to read the Voltaire compendium or about its serenity-inducing virtues. As the lone title named as the finale to a long peroration on reading it prompts the reader to form her own associations: to encyclopedism, yes, but perhaps also to the Enlightenment; to materialism, secularism and anti-clericalism (this sermon is delivered in a church; Seaman is introduced by a

<sup>174</sup> “The fourth was a huge tome called *The Abridged French Encyclopedia*, which he'd never heard of, in college or ever.” (244)

<sup>175</sup> “And you, who are so kind, now you must be asking: what did you read, Barry? I read everything. But I especially remember a certain book I read at one of the most desperate moments of my life and it brought me peace again. What book do I mean? What book do I mean? Well, it was a book called *An Abridged Digest of the Complete Works of Voltaire*, and I promise you that is one useful book, or at least it was of great use to me.” (256)

preacher and preceded by a gospel choir); to cultivating our own gardens in what is clearly not the best of all possible worlds.

And much like the *campesina* Florita Almada's identification with Count Giacomo Leopardi and with President Benito Juárez matters in part because of how unlikely it appears, how it feels like the kind of serendipity that alphabetical order or casual perusal can produce within an encyclopedia, the conjunction of a jailed Black Power revolutionary and a sometime-courtier, sometime-*proto-revolutionary philosophe* gets much of its charge from its surface implausibility. Barry Seaman is speaking as a black radical to a black audience, and his decision to select a single canonical white writer from an imperial European power feels counterintuitive on its face. It also feels crucial to the small-c catholicism or eclecticism or encyclopedism that he preaches. Earlier in his speech he affirms this explicitly, as a central lesson of his intervention: "Hay que leer libros...Lean libros de autores negros. Y de autoras negras. Pero no se queden ahí. Esa es mi verdadera aportación de esta noche. Cuando uno lee jamás pierde el tiempo" (325).<sup>176</sup> The affirmation that reading *per se* is worthwhile is in tension with any particularism about the identities of the authors one reads.

And the fact that the books Seaman places his trust in are both abbreviated versions of the kinds of vast oeuvres that both collectives and individuals produced in the Century of Lights underscores both the precarious conditions under which this reading is conducted (prison libraries do not contain complete editions) and a concomitant indifference to systematic completism. *2666* actually begins with the critics' attempt to reconstruct an author's, Archimboldi's, life and works. But the kind of time, institutional backing, and capacity to collaborate that the critics possess sets them far apart from the kind of any-port-in-a-storm reading of Voltaire that Seaman engages in in prison, that Florita engages in in the Sonoran countryside, that Archimboldi himself performs in Ansky's home village of Kostekino. In each of these cases isolation and hardship is made bearable by an intense identification with the serendipitously discovered author. As discussed in previous chapters, this is quite explicit in the cases of Florita and Archimboldi, both of whom see their experiences improbably reflected in the poetry of Leopardi and in Ansky's notebooks.

Seaman's identification with Voltaire isn't nearly as explicit, but the "serenity" that his readerly encounter affords him is comparable, and his polemical, moralistic sermon does feel like his own version of the *Dictionnaire philosophique*. Which returns us to the questions of definition and classification raised by the form of Seaman's sermon. Primed by the speaker to expect five topics, "not one more nor less," and cued by the capitalized rubric "DANGER" to expect a certain degree of direct focus on that topic, we might be surprised by Seaman's roundabout approach. His audience certainly is. There are the words that immediately follow the word "DANGER" (which ominously resembles a warning sign): "Contra lo que todos (o buena parte de los feligreses) esperaban, Seaman empezó hablando de su infancia en California. Dijo que para los que no conocen California, ésta a lo que más se parecía era a una isla encantada. Tal cual. Es igual que en las películas, pero mejor..." (313).<sup>177</sup>

As with Florita's speech and Archimboldi's reading of Ansky's notebooks, and in sharp contrast to the testimonies that make up the bulk of *Los detectives salvajes*, a key set piece of the

<sup>176</sup> "Read books...Read books by black writers. But don't stop there. This is my real contribution tonight. Reading is never a waste of time." (255)

<sup>177</sup> "Despite what the congregation (or most of it) expected, Seaman began by talking about his childhood in California. He said that for those who hadn't been to California, what it was most like was an enchanted island. The spitting image. Just like the movies, but better." (246)

novel is presented as a combination of direct quotation and paraphrase. The narrator steps in to describe the idiosyncrasies of Seaman's delivery and to tell us about the audience's reactions to many of his points. The discrepancy between what the narrator reports to be the content of the speech and what's quoted is evident here, as there is very little about Seaman's childhood. Instead, we get his remarks about how urban life in California is shaped by its built environment. Seaman makes his point by personalizing everything for his Detroit audience. He doesn't speak abstractly about low-density urbanization but rather recounts how in a city of high-rises like Detroit basic amenities are accessible by foot: "Puedes ir caminando a comprar la comida o puedes caminar hasta el bar más próximo (aquí le guiñó un ojo al reverendo Foster), o hasta la iglesia de tu congregación más próxima, o hasta un museo" (ibid.).<sup>178</sup> This kind of personal, lax style doubles as a form of quasi-novelistic, realist scene-setting. Seaman's speech will contain as much autobiography as sermonizing, and he clearly wants to connect with his audience by evoking their everyday lives. Which isn't to say that folksiness is his only register—the narrator tells us that Seaman then "extended himself" by citing "a series of fatal car accidents in a county of Detroit and a county of Los Angeles" (ibid.)—but it is the predominant one: we don't actually see those statistics on the page; impersonal information of that sort is elided in favor of reminiscence and anecdote. But information does matter here. For one thing, these automobile fatalities are the first point raised by Seaman that plausibly connects back to "PELIGRO," the stated topic of this first part of the sermon. And our whole sense of who Seaman is so far is dominated by his bookishness. We've seen him sitting in his book-strewn apartment writing with his reference books and we have a sense that he's done his homework.

Seaman's Californian prologue doesn't go much further, however. He instead invokes the real source of his authority and the true subject of the "PELIGRO" chapter of his story:

Miró a la sala, a un sitio impreciso en el centro de la nave, y dijo que él había sido uno de los fundadores del partido Panteras Negras. Concretamente, dijo, Marius Newell y yo. A partir de ese instante la conferencia dio un ligerísimo giro. Fue como si las puertas de la iglesia se hubieran abierto, escribió Fate en su cuaderno de notas, y hubiera entrado el fantasma de Newell. (314)<sup>179</sup>

Seaman's identity as one of the founders of the Black Panther Party is what defines him, but as soon as he invokes the Panthers, an outfit that undoubtedly knew danger first hand, he begins to talk about Marius Newell, the Huey Newton to his Bobby Seale. Fate's sense that Newell's is a real presence is borne out by the rest of the "DANGER" part of Seaman's speech, which amounts to an impressionistic biographical sketch of a fallen comrade.

Before fully turning to his friend, however, Seaman makes like a biographer and says a few things about Newell's mother. This passage follows immediately upon the one cited above:

Pero acto seguido, como si quisiera salir del atolladero, Seaman se puso a hablar de no de Newell sino de la madre de Newell, Anne Jordan Newell, y evocó su porte agraciado, su

<sup>178</sup> "You can go walking to buy groceries or you can walk to your local tavern (her he winked at Reverend Foster), or the local church you belong to, or a museum." (247)

<sup>179</sup> "he stared out into the room, at a vague spot in the middle of the sanctuary, and said he had been one of the founders of the Black Panthers. Marius Newell and I, he said, to be precise. After that, the speech subtly drifted from its course. It was as if the doors of the church had opened, wrote Fate in his notebook, and the ghost of Newell had come in." (247)

trabajo, obrera en una fábrica de aspersores, su religiosidad...[he goes on in this vein for several lines]...No hay nada superior a una madre, concluyó Seaman. Yo fundé, junto a Marius, los Panteras Negras. Trabajábamos en lo que fuera y comprábamos escopetas y pistolas para la autodefensa del pueblo. Pero una madre vale más que la revolución negra. Os lo puedo asegurar. En mi larga y azarosa vida he visto muchas cosas. Estuve en Argelia y estuve en China y en varias cárceles de los Estados Unidos. No hay nada que valga tanto como una madre. Esto lo digo aquí y lo digo en cualquier otro lugar y a cualquier hora, dijo con voz bronca. (ibid.)<sup>180</sup>

There are few clearer or more concise statements of the valuation of the intimate and private over the political and public in all of *2666*. Seaman invokes both arms bearing, the specific tactical innovation of the Black Panther Party, and the Party's key ideological commitment to a worldwide anti-imperial struggle,<sup>181</sup> and he sets both of them below loving motherhood. It's strange to see this old radical making the case that family is the haven in a heartless world, but it's just one more instance of the sentimental valorization of motherhood in *2666* and in Bolaño's work as a whole.<sup>182</sup>

Part of the motivation for Seaman's hyperbolic insistence that mothers matter might be corrective, a gesture to ward away the appearance of sexism. One popular conception of the historical Black Panther Party, after all, is that it was radical in everything but its gender politics, which were masculinist and retrograde.<sup>183</sup> Seaman might set the work of motherhood in opposition to the armed struggle in the passage above, but later in his speech he brings the two together:

Los Panteras Negras habíamos contribuido al cambio. Con nuestro grano de arena o con nuestro camión de volquete. Habíamos contribuido. También había contribuido la madre de Marius y todas las demás madres negras que por las noches, en vez de dormir, lloraron e imaginaron las puertas del infierno. (315)<sup>184</sup>

In moving from the exceptional Anne Jordan Newell to all the mothers who suffered so much for the movement, Seaman sounds like he's giving a political stump speech. He also sounds defensive in his repetition: by this point he's brought up Marius's murder at the hands of a black man and he's taking a moment to assess his friend's, and the movement as a whole's, legacy. In this retrospective mood, talk of revolution is replaced by an insistence on incremental change—

<sup>180</sup> "But just then, as if to avoid a certain awkwardness, Seaman began to talk not about Newell but about Newell's mother, Anne Jordan Newell. He described her appearance (pleasing), her work (she had a job in a factory that made irrigation systems), her faith...A mother is a precious thing, concluded Seaman. Marius and I founded the Panthers. We worked whatever jobs we could get and we bought shotguns and handguns for the people's self-defense. But a mother is worth more than the Black Revolution. That I can promise you. In my long and eventful life, I've seen many things. I was in Algeria and I was in China and in several prisons in the United States. A mother is a precious thing. This I say here and I'll say anywhere, anytime, he said in a hoarse voice." (247)

<sup>181</sup> This is precisely the thesis of the most recent and comprehensive study of the Panthers, Bloom and Martin's *Black against Empire*.

<sup>182</sup> In Chapter 1 I discussed how Lotte Reiter's desire to protect her son closes the novel, and in Chapter 2 I looked at how Florita Almada's story involves her re-imagining of herself as a kind of surrogate mother.

<sup>183</sup> See Bloom and Martin pp. 97ff. for a discussion of the BPP and gender.

<sup>184</sup> "The Panthers had helped bring the change. With our grain of sand or our dump truck. We had contributed. So had his mother and all the black mothers who wept at night and saw visions of the gates of hell when they should have been asleep." (248)

big or small, it doesn't matter. What does matter, he suggests, are those sleepless nights on which the Panthers' mothers faced hell. This version of heroism involving someone staying at home while one's child or loved one ventures out into a dangerous night has already appeared in "Amalfitano" and will be pervasive in "Crimes." Of course, in Santa Teresa the potential victims are young women rather than young men, and the mothers of the victims are conspicuous by their almost complete absence.

Seaman's sketch of armed men and worried mothers leaves out women Panthers like Angela Davis and Assata Shakur who took up arms for the revolution. And this neglect is part and parcel of the way an entire national political movement consisting of thousands of members looks when its story is condensed into that of its two founders and of their home state. And there's no doubt that the twin foci of the "DANGER" section of Seaman's speech are Marius Newell and California. In fact, Seaman gives Newell's attachment to California a tragic cast. He suggests that if Newell has never returned to California, where "mucho policia nos tiene tomada la medida" (314)<sup>185</sup>—note the suggestion that the police has sized them both up, knows who they are—he would have never been killed under such questionable circumstances. But Newell, in Seaman's telling, confesses that he feels too great an attachment to the coast and to the sea air in particular. This stray detail about Newell's love of the coastal breeze comes up halfway through the "DANGER" section but then becomes central in its finale, which is far more particular and elegiac than what has come before and which begins with Seaman's bafflement at Newell's presence in Santa Cruz, the site of his murder:

el único motivo que se me ocurre pensar que justificaría la presencia de Marius en Santa Cruz es el mar. Marius fue a ver y a oler el océano Pacífico. Y el asesino se desplazó a Santa Cruz siguiendo el olor de Marius. Y pasó lo que todos saben. A veces me imagino a Marius. Más frecuentemente de lo que en el fondo desearía. Y lo veo en una playa de California. En alguna de Big Sur, por ejemplo, o en la playa de Monterey, al norte de Fisherman's Wharf, subiendo por la Highway 1. Él está acodado en un mirador, de espaldas a nosotros. Es invierno y hay pocos turistas. Los Panteras Negras somos jóvenes, ninguno mayor de veinticinco años. Todos vamos armados, aunque hemos dejado las armas en el coche, y nuestros rostros expresan un profundo desagrado. El mar ruge. Entonces yo me acerco a Marius y le digo vámonos de aquí ahora mismo. Y en ese momento Marius se da la vuelta y me mira. Está sonriendo. Está más allá. Y me indica el mar con una mano, porque es incapaz de expresar con palabras lo que siente. Y entonces yo me asusto, aunque es mi hermano a quien tengo a mi lado, y pienso: el mar es el peligro. (316)<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>185</sup> "there are too many cops here, cops out to get us" (247)

<sup>186</sup> "the only reason I can think of why Marius was in Santa Cruz is the ocean. Marius went to see the Pacific Ocean, went to smell it. And the killer tracked him down to Santa Cruz. And you all know what happened next. Oftentimes I think about Marius. More than I want to, to tell you the truth. I see him on the beach in California. A beach in Big Sur, maybe, or in Monterey north of Fisherman's Wharf, up Highway 1. He's standing at a lookout point, looking away. It's winter, off-season. The Panthers are young, none of us even twenty-five. We're all armed, but we've left our weapons in the car, and you can see the deep dissatisfaction in our faces. The sea roars. Then I go up to Marius and I say let's get out of here now. And at that moment Marius turns and he looks at me. He's smiling. He's beyond it all. And he waves his hand towards the sea. because he's incapable of expressing what he feels in words. And the I'm afraid, even though it's my brother beside me, and I think: the danger is the sea." (248-9)

Like *Amuleto*, this first part of Seaman's sermon withholds the secret of its title to the very end.<sup>187</sup> And even then, the definition of danger is inhuman, the veritable ocean. The lesson seems to be that the sea, which Newell loved so much, is what got him killed. But it's unclear if we're to take this as a generalizable warning about what we're drawn to—whether we should beware our own seas—or whether the sea itself in its singularity is full of danger. It's remarkable how Seaman's helpful didacticism drops out completely as he embarks on this reverie. He's showing us his verbal sketch of Marius by the seashore the way Marius shows him the sea: without a gloss and with the expectation that we'll join him in some ill-defined wild surmise. In this sense, we couldn't be farther from the didactic function of a reference book. But at the same time, we can feel the preservative function of an encyclopedia: something essential about Marius Newell, Californian revolutionary, is imparted to us. One of the few things that Barry Seaman feels compelled to share about his comrade is that he had this ineffable experience of the sea.

And as we've seen, that tension between the singular individual and everyone else is absolutely essential to *2666* and to its set-piece speeches, of which Seaman's is most definitely one. What separates Seaman's speech is that he speaks in his capacity as the surviving founder of a revolutionary party that—unlike Boris Ansky's Bolsheviks or Azucena Esquivel Plata's PRI—never seized power. What the Black Panthers' accomplished is in doubt, by Seaman's own admission. What's never in doubt is the sacrifice they collectively made. Alongside all the mothers who suffered while their children were out on patrol are the fallen comrades, who will never get to raise their own families. Here's what Seaman says about Newell, shortly before launching into his closing reverie about the sea:

Siempre dijo que a su primer hijo lo iba a llamar Frank, en memoria de un compañero que murió en la prisión de Soledad. En realidad, hubiera tenido que tener por lo menos treinta hijos para recordar a los amigos muertos. O diez y a cada uno ponerle tres nombres. O cinco y a cada uno ponerle cinco nombres. (315)<sup>188</sup>

The idea of doing right by memorializing all of the dead, and not just a close friend, is right there in Seaman's arithmetic, which feels both jokey and grimly serious at the same time. This passing accounting of Panthers' casualties brings to mind their collective struggle in a way that Seaman's other abstractions don't. And it also focuses on what's owed to the group by the individual in a way that feels meta-reflexive given what Seaman is up to in his speech: like Newell granting a special place to Frank by naming his first-born after him, Seaman has chosen Newell as the representative figure for his lesson on "DANGER" *tout court* and on the danger faced by the Panthers as a whole. Perhaps we owe the dead the dignity of naming them—this passage undoubtedly resonates with Bolaño's decision, in "Crimes," to list the full name of every identified victim—the passage suggests, but perhaps some truth about their collective experience can only be captured by tarrying with the idiosyncrasies of an individual. When he first mentions Newell's love for the sea, Seaman mentions but never elucidates—"mi teoría no viene en cuenta ahora," he says (315)<sup>189</sup>—an idea he has about why black people like the sea less than people of other races. It's unclear whether this alludes to his closing equation of the sea and danger, but his

<sup>187</sup> In fact, all five sections end with either their titular word or with a sentence about that particular word.

<sup>188</sup> "He always said he would call his first son Frank, after a friend who lost his life in Soledad Prison. Truth is, he would've had to have at least thirty children to pay tribute to all the friends who'd been taken from him. Or ten, and give each of them three names. Or five, and give each of them six." (248)

<sup>189</sup> "My theory doesn't apply here" (248; translation modified)

mere mention of it, and of his stereotypical notion of black people not liking the sea, evokes both Newell's identity as a black man *and* his distinctiveness.

Which again returns us to the question of how to read the end of Seaman's "DANGER" lesson and, in particular, his decision to both focus intently on Marius Newell and to make an equivocally general connection between danger and the sea. What Seaman's really offering here, I propose, moves far afield from the kind of basic information about an important personage that a reference book might include but it gives us what purports to be the very essence of the man. This is a haunting, after all: the reminiscence that returns time and again to a close friend decades after its subject's death. Which isn't to say that it's merely of personal interest. Note the hallmark Bolaño topographical names, which serve almost as an invitation for one to go to the central coast of California to try to see what Marius Newell saw, an invitation that's all the more powerful because it occurs under interdiction—Seaman warns us explicitly that what's out there is danger itself.

In some ways this image of sublime, natural dread resonates with Franco's complaint about Bolaño's romanticism. Her final question in "Questions for Bolaño" is about "whether in this voluntaristic universe there is no alternative but to march heroically onwards towards nowhere" (215). In contradistinction to writers who have chronicled the social movements that seek to counteract the lawless violence in Latin America, Franco wonders whether Bolaño is a kind of "romantic anarchist." Citing the closing vision in *Amuleto*, wherein a mass of young people march into an abyss, united only by "su generosidad y su valentía," Franco comments, in the closing words of her essay: "they are without a common goal. Can this be the exodus? Or do that 'generosity' and 'valor' belong to an earlier age? It is Shelley and Mary that I see marching along and perhaps dragging Byron reluctantly behind" (ibid.). This mobilization of writers' names as stand-ins for an entire movement and attitude is a nicely Bolaño-esque touch on Franco's part, but it also renders her critique cryptic in precisely the way that Bolaño's name-based critical statements tend to be. Why would a return to the spirit of the romantics be necessarily a bad thing? Why is Byron—byword for assuming doomed romantic causes—the more sensible figure who must be dragged in this doomed march to the abyss? More broadly, why should the role of the writer be simply to chronicle instances of political activism? Part of what makes Bolaño's work so disquieting is that it's not at all obvious that he believes, like the critics whom Franco cites, that "action to right wrongs can be meaningful" (ibid.). Yet Barry Seaman and Marius Newell do form an important part of Bolaño's "voluntaristic universe," and they undoubtedly believed that collective, political action was imperative.

And it absolutely matters that *both* Newell and Seaman are part of the picture. One way of thinking about "DANGER"'s admonitory title and placement at the outset of Seaman's sermon is that it's a cautionary tale, a warning to beware of the kind of romantic attachment that ended up costing Marius Newell his life. In the pairs of characters we've examined throughout this study there is often a figure who dies tragically young and one who survives to tell tales into old age. Even though they never met and their relationship was entirely one-sided, the writers Ansky and Archimboldi follow this pattern: reading Ansky's notebooks was a formative experience for the young Hans Reiter, and the suggestion that Ansky is memorialized in Archimboldi's writing pervades the last part of *2666*. In a less heroic key, Azucena Esquivel Plata survives her friend Kelly Rivera Parker and makes it her life's work to avenge her, a resolution that also takes the form of writing when the congresswoman hires Sergio González Rodríguez to expose what she's discovered about the corrupt system responsible for her friend's death. That request, which evinces the formerly cynical Esquivel Plata's passionate belief that



exposure of the truth is a kind of action that will lead to change, concludes “Crimes,” leaving us uncertain about whether the exposé changes anything. Nevertheless, it leaves open a kind of hope. Franco is right that in what we see of Bolaño’s fictional world, meaningful change doesn’t take place. The felt desire for change is tremendous, however, and it is often most fervidly articulated by survivors like Seaman, Esquivel Plata, or even Florita Almada, who hasn’t lost a single close friend but who experiences the femicides as the loss of a host of daughters. It’s true that the young, brave poets marching into the abyss pervade Bolaño’s work, but to see them as the only models for action in his fiction is to ignore all those characters who survive what he liked to refer to as the “guerras floridas” and who serve as eulogists and keepers of the flame. These characters are everywhere in Bolaño’s fiction as well<sup>190</sup> and they play an especially large role in *2666*. So what is it that these sage-like figures have to offer us beyond their warnings and their eulogies for doomed youth? The remaining four sections of Seaman’s sermon offer some answers.

What they contain, appropriately enough, is an abbreviated compendium of the knowledge acquired during the main stages of his life: facing down the California police as a Black Panther, travelling the world, living for many years “with all expenses paid by the government of the United States of America,” and ultimately cooking, reading, and giving speeches (317). The material he covers touches on distinct fields of knowledge in a non-academic way. His second section, on “DINERO,” covers what he calls “economic relativism”— basically a gloss on the exchange value of commodities at the various prisons that have housed him, along with an exhortation that poor people, and poor black people in particular, spend their money on self-improvement, charity, and education, no matter how stacked the system set against them might be. This appeal to distinctly un-revolutionary politics of personal responsibility is notable not only for its conservatism but also for the way that Seaman uses it to implicitly discourage his audience from seeing his own trajectory as exemplary. His prefatory point that his “nulos estudios” mean that he’s not the most qualified person to speak on the “mystery” of money doesn’t feel wholly disingenuous: Seaman is deadly serious in asking the parents in his audience to send their kids to college, to help them win scholarships, even if the consequences of that transition could be grisly: “[Ganen] becas de estudio. Aunque los becarios acaben mal. Aunque los becarios acaben suicidándose de tanto escuchar rap o en un arrebato de ira asesinen a su profesor blanco y a cinco compañeros de clase” (317).<sup>191</sup> This fantasy of a school shooting restores a sense of the history of racial violence in the U.S. to what had become a fairly anodyne list of injunctions to take control of one’s life. It cuts short the larger fantasy of upward mobility and suggests that Seaman still can’t quite imagine that model of education bearing fruit. Any kind of representation of that world of bourgeois success appears foreign to Seaman’s discourse.

Food is a completely different matter. After the short and impersonal section on money, the food section of Seaman’s speech returns us into full autobiographical mode. He evokes the misery of his years in prison, where he learned nothing but “the cruelty of the jailers and the sadism of some inmates,” and recounts telling his story of meeting Lin Biao of the Chinese

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<sup>190</sup> Some prominent examples include the narrator of *Estrella distante*, Auxilio Lacouture, and many of the older figures interviewed in the central section of *Los detectives salvajes*.

<sup>191</sup> “Scholarships. It doesn’t matter if the scholarship students come to a bad end. Never mind if the scholarship students end up killing themselves because they listened to too much rap, or killing their white teacher and five classmates in a rage.” (249-50)

Communist Party to a sadistic parole officer who forced him to speak.<sup>192</sup> Seaman achieves a renewed sense of purpose when he remembers that the one thing he didn't forget in his dark years was how to cook. Like the other, less immediately useful varieties of knowledge that he spent a lifetime accumulating through his reading, his culinary know-how increased no matter where he found himself. He begins to write a book:

Con la ayuda de mi hermana, que era una santa y a la que le encantaba hablar de estas cosas, fui anotando todas las recetas que recordaba, las de mi madre, las que había hecho en la cárcel, las que los sábados hacía en casa, en la azotea de casa, para mi hermana, aunque ella, he de decirlo, no era muy aficionada a la carne. (319)<sup>193</sup>

His rediscovery of the central value of cooking allows Seaman the homecoming that had been eluding him. It's the one thing that links the various phases of his life together and one of the forces that binds him to his sister, whose benevolent presence hovers over this section the way Anne Jordan Newell's does over "DANGER." Like his earlier encomia to motherhood-over-revolution, Seaman's celebration of cooking involves a hyperbolic-seeming turn towards the private and the sentimental, towards hearth and home.

At the same time, the work of writing down his recipes is what turns the forgotten revolutionary into a semi-public figure once more. Seaman doesn't just keep his and his family's lore to himself; he publishes it, and he experiences that process of turning something private and particular into a public thing, into a *res publica*, as something extraordinary:

El libro me puso en circulación otra vez. Aprendí a combinar la gastronomía con la memoria. Aprendí a combinar la gastronomía con la historia. Aprendí a combinar la gastronomía con mi agradecimiento y mi perplejidad por la bondad de la gente, empezando por mi difunta hermana y siguiendo por tantas personas. Y aquí permítanme que haga una precisión. Cuando digo perplejidad, quiero decir también maravilla. Es decir, una cosa extraordinaria que causa admiración. Como la flor de la maravilla, o como las azaleas, o como las siemprevivas. Pero también me di cuenta de que esto no bastaba. No podía vivir siempre con mis famosas y riquísimas recetas de costillas. No dan para tanto las costillas. Hay que cambiar. Hay que revolverse y cambiar. Hay que saber buscar aunque uno no sepa qué es lo que busca. (319-20)<sup>194</sup>

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<sup>192</sup> This brief section of Seaman's speech is a rather wonderful condensed version of the novel's penchant for the unlikely biographical connection. As Seaman says: "así podía estar con Lin durante tres horas, él pidiéndome que le hablara de los tipos a los que yo había matado por la espalda, y yo hablándole de los políticos y de los países que había conocido" (319). Namedropping and anecdote become a form of resistance for Seaman, a way of showing how (literally) far he got in his revolutionary struggle while the powers that be insist on reducing him to a mere craven murderer. The brief mention of Mao and Lin Biao—based on a real visit that the Black Panthers made to the People's Republic—also includes the Chinese Revolution in the novel in a way not too dissimilar to the way Ansky's story includes the Russian Revolution later on.

<sup>193</sup> "With the help of my sister, who was one of God's angels and who loved to talk about food, I started writing down all the recipes I remembered, my mother's recipes, the ones I made in prison, the ones I made on Saturdays at home on the roof for my sister, though she didn't care for meat." (251)

<sup>194</sup> "The book put me back in the public eye. I learned to combine cooking with history. I learned to combine cooking with the thankfulness and confusion I felt at the kindness of so many people, from my late sister to countless others. And let me explain something. When I say confusion, I also mean awe. In other words, the sense of wonderment at a marvelous thing, like the lilies that bloom and die in a single day, or azaleas, or forget-me-nots. But I also realized this wasn't enough. I couldn't live forever on my recipes for ribs, my famous recipes. Ribs were not

At this point, Seaman closes the “COMIDA” section by dictating the recipe for orange duck. We hear his caveats about how expensive and time-consuming a dish it is to prepare and his list of ingredients, but not the actual cooking instructions. He thus shares with his audience the result of the learning process that he describes so ecstatically in this passage, which is so short on description of what he actually did to learn all these things (did all that learning take place as he talked to people about his book while on tour? was it a question of writing more books?), but pellucid on how the art or science of cooking can and should be combined with other forms of knowledge and experience. Seaman’s cookbook here can serve as a synecdoche for *2666* as a whole insofar as it is a book meant to circulate, to roam from one topic to the next and from one person to the next. And that opening out from his sister to strange interlocutors or readers is important because, as I hope this study has shown by this point, that kind of public-mindedness isn’t all that common in *2666*. And neither is appreciativeness or kindness.

Nevertheless, the kind of combinatory work that Seaman engages does seem to allow him to discover the extraordinary kindness of strangers, a kindness that, he’s careful to specify, is exceedingly rare. With a figure that anticipates the botanical metaphor of the old writer in Cologne whom the fledgling writer Archimboldi meets after the war, Seaman compares that goodness shown to him with the most marvelous flowers. Unlike the masterpieces and master authors whom the German writer fetishized, the receptivity Seaman finds upon publishing his cookbook isn’t wholly unique—he’s found a whole audience after all, and he’s grateful to “so many people” beyond his sister—but, like the beauty of azaleas or perennials, it is restricted to a particular class.

But the circulation that began with that first publication doesn’t end there—in fact, it shouldn’t end there, according to Seaman. He may have found those who appreciated him because of his ribs recipes, but he’s well aware that pork ribs do not a diet make, so he urges his audience to go beyond those stand-by family recipes so redolent of home and to search out the new and different.

This is advice that has much in common with the exhortation to read broadly and incessantly that Seaman delivers at the very end of his sermon. In fact, Seaman makes the connection between diverse eating and reading diets quite directly: he “connects gastronomy with literature” as it were, when, he launches into his peroration on reading by giving out a few more recipes, one of which, for lemon Brussels sprouts, we’re given in full, and the others which we’re merely told about: “Después dio la receta de la Ensalada de endibias y gambas y de la Ensalada de brécol y después dijo que no sólo de comida sana vivía el hombre. Hay que leer libros, dijo. No ver tanta televisión” (325).<sup>195</sup> And from there, after the brief warning about TV, Seaman is off giving advice about the importance of broad, indiscriminate reading which we’ve examined already. His encouragements are not only introduced by references to the sustaining quality of healthy food, however; they’re also interleaved with direct references to the delight we take in eating. Greedily reading in prison seems to be one of the few, if not only, ways to enjoy that kind of pleasure: “Yo en la cárcel leía. Allí me puse a leer. Mucho. Devoraba los libros

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the answer. You have to change. You have to turn yourself around and change. You have to know how to look even if you don’t know what you’re looking for.” (251)

<sup>195</sup> “Then he dictated recipes for Endive and Shrimp Salad and Broccoli Salad and then said that man couldn’t live on healthy food alone. You have to read books, he said. Not watch so much TV.” (255)

como si fueran costillitas de cerdo picantes” (325)<sup>196</sup> and “a veces [leía] con gran lentitud, como si cada frase o palabra fuera un manjar para todo mi cuerpo, no solamente para mi cerebro” (326).<sup>197</sup> It’s worth remembering that this is also all part of Seaman’s affirmation that reading indiscriminately rather than selectively has a value of its own. One of the things that’s remarkable about this passage is that—much like the end of “DANGER,” which equivocally turns the experience of a notorious, hunted radical into something universal—it derives a lesson about the utility of reading anything, at any given moment from the suffocating experience of incarceration. (Seaman at one point speculates that being in a California prison must be akin to being “inside the planet Mercury.”) The universal experience of eating something delicious isn’t the only one that Seaman appeals to in making his case for relentless reading (“Leer es como pensar, como rezar, como hablar con un amigo, como exponer tus ideas, como escuchar las ideas de los otros, como escuchar música (sí, sí), como contemplar un paisaje, como salir a dar un paseo por la playa” (ibid.)),<sup>198</sup> but it’s the first and most carefully, persistently invoked one.

### Sor Juana’s Cookbook

Gastronomy combines better with literature than other practices or forms of knowledge. There seems to be something about food, and cooking in particular, that’s more intimately connected to bookishness than other pursuits. Before taking a closer look at the remaining sections of Seaman’s sermon, I want to turn to a couple of other points in the novel that make this connection. The first is an episode that befalls Piero Morini in “Critics” when he decides on the spur of the moment to visit Liz Norton in London. Stuck with an empty day in between visits with his friend, Morini wanders over to Hyde Park, where, while resting from his exertions in an Italian Garden that doesn’t seem at all Italian to him, he has an encounter with a homeless man. Asked by this man what he’s reading, Morini explains that it’s *Il libro di cucina di Juana Inés de la Cruz* by Angelo Morino, a book written in Italian about a Mexican nun and some of her recipes. Their exchange is worth some attention:

- ¿Y a esa monja mexicana le gustaba cocinar? –preguntó el desconocido.
- En cierto modo sí, aunque también escribía poemas –dijo Morini.
- Desconfío de la monjas –dijo el desconocido.
- Pues esta monja era una gran poeta –dijo Morini.
- Desconfío de la gente que come siguiendo un libro de recetas –dijo el desconocido como si no lo hubiera oído.
- ¿Y en quién confía usted? –le preguntó Morini.
- En la gente que come cuando tiene hambre, supongo –dijo el desconocido. (71-2)<sup>199</sup>

<sup>196</sup> “I read in jail. That’s where I started to read. I read a lot. I went through books like they were barbecue pork ribs.” (256; translation modified)

<sup>197</sup> “sometimes [I read] very slowly, as if each sentence or word was a tasty morsel for my whole body, not just my brain” (256; translation modified)

<sup>198</sup> “Reading is like thinking, like praying, like talking to a friend, like expressing your ideas, like listening to other people’s ideas, like listening to music (oh yes), like looking at the view, like taking a walk on the beach.” (256)

<sup>199</sup> “So this Mexican nun liked to cook?” asked the stranger.

“In a way she did, although she also wrote poems,” Morini replied.

“I don’t trust nuns,” said the stranger.

“Well, this nun was a great poet,” said Morini.

“I don’t trust people who cook from recipes,” said the stranger, as if he hadn’t heard him.

“So whom do you trust?” asked Morini.

“People who eat when they’re hungry, I guess,” said the stranger. (49)

Morini evinces a bit of doubt over how best to introduce Sor Juana's multiple identities to this random stranger, who is persistently identified in the text as "el desconocido" even after he reveals in passing that his name is "Dick." Having chosen to first identify her by her nationality and her ecclesiastical status and then indirectly as a cook, he needs to then explain that she was a poet, a great poet even, and thus someone to whom the stranger's ordinary reservations about nuns may not apply. The stranger ignores this, of course—strangers brushing off the critics' obsession with literary greatness is a recurrent feature of "The Part About the Critics"—in order to express further distrust, this time with people who "eat" (rather than "cook") by following recipes in books. Morini then accords him the respect of asking him what kind of person he does trust and the stranger changes the topic slightly yet again by invoking hunger and implicitly dismissing any overinvestment in anything that goes beyond the satiation of need.

And their conversation's slippage from one topic to another doesn't end there. The stranger then "explains" his remark about food—"Luego pasó a explicarle que él..." (72)—by telling the story of the last job he ever had, the one that drove him away from the working world and into the streets. The story may only be a page or so long but it's in the same disquieting and despairing mode that so many speeches by strangers in *2666* seem to be.<sup>200</sup> It hinges on a transformation that the speaker had with regards to the objects he used to make: mugs with novelty slogans and jokes on them. At one point the company decides to include illustrations along with the text on the mugs and this slowly begins to bother the man. He takes his complaint about how the new mugs now hurt him to his boss, Andy, and eventually loses his cool completely:

¿Qué quieres decir?, dijo Andy. Pues que antes las tazas hijas de puta no me herían y que ahora me están destrozando por dentro. ¿Y qué demonios las hace tan distintas, aparte de que son ahora más modernas?, dijo Andy. Justamente eso, le respondí, antes las tazas no eran tan modernas y aunque su intención fuera herirme no conseguían hacerlo, sus alfileretazos no los sentía, en cambio ahora las putas tazas parecen samuráis armados con esas jodidas espadas de samurái y me están volviendo loco. (73)<sup>201</sup>

That unhinged samurai simile makes the man sound not only like so many speakers in the novel but also like its narrator. And the feeling of being stabbed by modernization, that the embellishment of "insulso"—insipid—clichés with graphics is akin to weaponization, also lines him up as one of the novel's many malcontents.

And though this story takes us quite far from Sor Juana and her recipes, the stranger's conception of his suffering matters because those recipes will offer that man a modicum of solace. After telling his story, asking Morini what he makes of it—the critic confesses his bafflement—and explaining that he's now a London beggar, the stranger asks, or perhaps

<sup>200</sup> Good examples include Amalfitano's rant to the critics against the Mexican intellectual establishment, Marco Antonio Guerra's rants to Amalfitano, and the old man in Cologne's rant to Archimboldi which I examine at length in Chapter 1. This rant end with the stranger asking Morini what he makes of his story. Like Liz Norton at the end of Archimboldi's rant, he confesses that he has no idea.

<sup>201</sup> "What do you mean? said Andy. That the bloody mugs didn't bother me before and now they're destroying me inside. So what the hell makes them different, aside from being more modern? asked Andy. That's it exactly, I answered, the mugs weren't so modern before, and even if they tried to hurt me, they couldn't, I didn't feel their sting, but now the fucking mugs are like samurais armed with those fucking samurai swords and they're driving me insane." (50)

demands (Morini finds the tone threatening) to be read a few recipes. Morini demurs, claiming that he has to meet his friend Liz, but after a brief exchange about names—the stranger finds Liz’s name very pretty, and thinks that Morini’s own name sounds like that of Morino, the author of the book on Sor Juana’s cooking—the two of them make a deal. The stranger amends his request: “Si no le importa...léame al menos los nombres de algunas recetas. Yo cerraré los ojos y los imaginaré” (74).<sup>202</sup> Morini does so, “slowly and with an actor’s intonation,” and fourteen names in, the beggar falls asleep: “Al llegar al *dolce de mamey* creyó que el desconocido se había dormido y empezó a alejarse del Jardín Italiano” (ibid.).<sup>203</sup> The dulcet tones of Italian soothe the wild man to sleep precisely at the point when that Old-World language feels compelled to incorporate a New-World fruit with an untranslatable name. Of 2666’s lists this is the one that’s presented as most notable for its aesthetics. It contains no conceptual puzzle about the relationship between different writers and no gloss about what condition each strange-sounding, Greek-prefixed phobia might refer to. It is instead theatrically intoned in Italian by a native speaker of Italian in Hyde Park’s Italian Garden to an English beggar in a translation from Mexican Spanish.

Indeed, it’s one of those set pieces in 2666 where the improbability of the national origin of the various people and texts at play is self-reflexively foregrounded. Asked by Morini what he does, the stranger presents himself as “un mendigo londinense,” a London beggar, which Morini can’t help but take as a kind of performative branding: “Parece como si me estuviera enseñando una atracción turística” he thinks, but is careful not to say. Touches like this one move this episode, like many others in “Critics”—which from the get-go is particularly dense with labels of nationality—away from naturalism to a kind of allegory.<sup>204</sup> Morini is literally a tourist in London and in this moment he’s acutely aware that he’s having the kind of experience he perhaps ought to be having in London. In fact, wandering around London will be something that Morini begins to do ever more regularly (cf. 130-131, Sor Juana’s book comes up on 135). The threatening atmosphere of this whole scene, in which Morini acquiesces to the stranger’s request in order to stave off the possibility of violence, also heralds the beating of the cab driver that Morini’s fellow tourists and critics Pelletier and Espinoza will deliver in the not-too-distant future, at least in part as a way of staking their claim on Liz Norton. This scene plays out in a fundamentally different way, however. While there the critics antagonize the taxi driver in part because of how unaware he is that in calling London a labyrinth he’s entering the literary tradition of Borges and Stevenson, here Morini takes the time to explain who Sor Juana is and ends up being able to share something of hers with the homeless man. Of course, what he does manage to share isn’t poetry or even the full text of the recipes, it’s simply a list of names of dishes in a language the man doesn’t speak. Nevertheless, all the man wants is to hear those names so that he can close his eyes and imagine what they might be like and, as far as we can tell, he succeeds in lulling himself to sleep that way. Cooking and then formalizing his knowledge of cooking into recipes saves Barry Seaman when he finds himself in dire straits. The very idea of what the exotic food cooked by a Mexican nun and expressed in Italian might be like affords this stranger some peace as well.

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<sup>202</sup> “If you wouldn’t mind... at least read me the names of some recipes. I’ll close my eyes and imagine them.” (51)

<sup>203</sup> “Bi the time he got to *dolce di mamey*, the stranger seemed to have fallen asleep and Morini left the Italian Gardens.” (51)

<sup>204</sup> For an in-depth exploration of the novel’s relationship to allegorical form see David Kurnick’s “Comparison, Allegory, and the Address of ‘Global’ Realism (The Part About Bolaño).”

And for readers of *2666* it also affords the rare experience of looking at something that looks a lot like poetry. Other poems are present in the novel as well, of course—most notably, Leopardi’s “Night Song” is quoted at considerable length by Florita Almada. But in that case, the verse is both integrated seamlessly into the big blocks of prose of Florita’s monologue and the very status of the song as verse is obscured by the fact that Florita takes it to be—and presents it to her listeners—as autobiography rather than poetry. Sor Juana’s Italian recipes have a greater formal similarity to the diagrams of philosophers’ names that Amalfitano draws and to the Duchampian readymade he creates when he hangs Dieste’s *Testamento geométrico* from a clothesline in front of his house: they’re found poetry, with their own anaphoric-looking organization: three *Sgonfiotti*, are followed by a couple of miscellaneous dishes—*Crespelle*, *Uova regali*—and then a series of *Dolci*. Somewhere in the recitation of these names the spell works and Morini is freed from the monster in the garden. The names of the recipes have a certain “UTILIDAD” for him as well.<sup>205</sup>

Like his fellow critics, Morini is a target of satire in the first part of the novel, but if the narrow-minded incapacity to behave morally towards those unlike themselves is one of the main aspects of their character that’s satirized, he deserves considerably less of this ridicule. Part of what set him apart is his interest in trying to understand people who appear mad or who don’t subscribe to the same standards of reason and decorum that he and his fellow academics do. His encounter with the beggar in the Italian Garden actually serves as a prelude to a much longer sequence in the novel involving the painter Edwin Johns, a man who, like the beggar, finds modernization intolerable and decides to take radical action. In his case, he cuts off his hand with a machete and nails it to one of his paintings. Morini is deeply moved when he hears Johns’s story from Norton, and he eventually goes all the way to an asylum in the Swiss Alps to seek the painter out (119ff.). He’s also the first among the critics to hear about the crimes in Santa Teresa and the only one who refuses to take the trip there. That decision might seem at odds with the kind of curiosity that I’m ascribing to him in this brief sketch, but it’s in keeping both with the radical solitariness that he cultivates and perhaps also with a realization that comes to him before it does to the other critics, that the search for Archimboldi is in vain or that it can only lead to an abyss. In fact, one of the ways to read Morini’s trajectory in “Critics” is as an affirmation that horror is also to be found in the Old Continent. When Liz Norton decides to abandon Pelletier and Espinoza in Santa Teresa and to return to England, she hears of Johns’s death, and it’s her fascination with the painters’ fate that eventually leads her to call Morini. The two of them bond over the terrible state of the world (200), end up together, and have a happy, if open, ending, at

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<sup>205</sup> Later in “Critics,” when Morini meets Rodolfo Alatorre, the Mexican writer studying abroad in Toulouse who will provide him with the crucial clue that will lead his fellow critics, but not him, to Mexico, the two literati discuss Mexican literature and Sor Juana’s recipes come up again: “Primero hablaron de Alfonso Reyes, a quien Morini conocía pasablemente, y luego de Sor Juana, de quien Morini no podía olvidar aquel libro escrito por Morino, ese Morino que parecía ser él mismo, en donde se reseñaban las recetas de cocina de la monja mexicana” (135). Note that Morini seems to have internalized the homeless man’s suggestion that he and Morino must have some deeper affinity because of the likeness of their names. Also, in the context of this review of Morini’s knowledge of Mexican culture—he gets a passing grade on Alfonso Reyes—his attachment to the recipe book feels more equivocal. The possibility that his familiarity with Sor Juana is overly dependent on that book by his fellow Italian is suddenly open. Of course, in the larger context of the European Archimboldians’ knowledge of Latin American literature, his lacunae are insignificant: their trip to Mexico suggests that Pelletier, Espinoza, and Norton would fail any such examination.

“First they discussed Alfonso Reyes, with whom Morini was reasonably well acquainted, then Sor Juana, Morini unable to forget the book by Morino—that Morino who might almost have been Morini himself—on the Mexican nun’s recipes.” (99)

least compared to the two other critics. And it's Morini's passion for a figure like Johns that makes this possible.

### A Legacy of Ice Cream

Morini's chance meeting with the beggar in the Italian Garden also bears a startling resemblance to the novel's very last episode, another encounter between strangers that intertwines biography and literature, the fields of gardening and gastronomy, and the continents of Europe and America. It takes place in the restaurant terrace of a wooded Hamburg park between an octogenarian Archimboldi and a complete stranger. It is introduced by a random-seeming definition, shorn of prelude or context:

Fürst Pückler.

Si te quieres tomar un buen helado de chocolate, vainilla y fresa, puedes pedir un fürst Pückler. Te traerán un helado de tres sabores, pero no tres sabores cualquiera sino exactamente de chocolate, vainilla y fresa. Eso es lo que es un fürst Pückler. (1116-7)<sup>206</sup>

We've looked at the moment that immediately precedes this. It's a rather tender moment in which Archimboldi, after decades of neglect, promises to help his sister Lotte by going to Mexico to help her son Klaus. It ends with a question from Lotte that's poignant, if not plangent, in its irony: "¿Tú te ocuparás de todo?" *You'll take care of everything*. This elderly woman who's lived through so much attempting to turn her brother into the giant she took him to be when he was a kid.

Lotte's question about what her brother will be able to do for Klaus connects, of course, to the mystery of what Archimboldi is doing in Mexico at the turn of the millennium, a mystery that has been open for roughly a thousand pages and that is never resolved. All we're given after so much portent—remember that evocations of the presence of the Teutonic giant constitute the very ends of parts one and three of the book—is the purpose behind his visit; what Archimboldi gets up to upon arriving in Mexico remains unrepresented, something readers are forced to extrapolate.

Put another way, the drama of *2666* could end, *does* end, with Lotte's question left to resonate. So what is this strange pendant of a fragment doing here? And why is it introduced with this breezy definition of a combination of ice cream flavors, complete with ad-like second-person address? Affectively, it's an exchange of pathos for bathos, a jarring little anticlimax that prevents us from tarrying with Lotte's angst over her son's fate or her long-delayed reunion with her brother. It also has an informative purpose insofar as it fills readers in on something they presumably don't know but that Archimboldi, who orders and enjoys a Fürst Pückler in the story that follows, does. The second-person address attains an added interest in this case because it reveals that the novel assumes a broadly international, or at least primarily non-Germanophone, readership. Readers in the Americas might well know this combination of ice cream flavors by the label Neapolitan, and part of the function of this definition and of the story that follows it is to highlight how the same mixture or recipe might go by different names in different places. So much knowledge, in particular of writers and works of literature is presumed in *2666*—just think

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<sup>206</sup> "Fürst Pückler.

If you want a good chocolate, vanilla, and strawberry ice cream, you can order a Fürst Pückler. They'll bring you an ice cream in three flavors, but not just any three flavors, only chocolate, vanilla, and strawberry. That's a Fürst Pückler." (891)



of all the writers to whom Archimboldi is compared in “Critics”—but the novel ends with this small lesson, first about what “Fürst Pückler” means and then about its origin.

The story of that origin is conveyed to us in the final iteration of that classic 2666 micro-genre: the unprompted speech by the complete stranger. Like so many of those speeches, it makes its central point within its first few lines:

–Permítame que me presente –dijo–. Me llamo Alexander fürst Pückler. El, ¿cómo llamarlo?, creador de este helado –dijo– fue un antepasado mío, un fürst Pückler muy brillante, gran viajero, hombre ilustrado, cuyas principales aficiones eran la botánica y la jardinería. Por supuesto, él pensaba, si alguna vez pensó en esto, que pasaría a la, ¿cómo llamarlo?, historia por alguno de los muchos opúsculos que escribió y publicó... (1117)<sup>207</sup>

The irony that this fürst Pückler wants to articulate, and which he will close his speech by reiterating, is already here: his curiously famous predecessor devoted himself to writing and travel, gardens and gardening, but he is forever and only associated with the “creation” of this flavor combination. Here the cultivation of plants, the fruits of intellectual labor and of the circulation through many lands, are all cast in shadow by one stroke of culinary—if that is the right word—luck or genius. Either way, his descendant means to demonstrate that the equation of his ancestor’s name with the flavor is reductive and unfair by giving Archimboldi a sense of how accomplished that man was.

The rest of this speech is 2666’s final venture into both biographical encyclopedism and literary criticism. It revisits many of the novel’s themes for one last time: the discovery of the worthwhile amidst so much dross (“pareciera que el fin último de cada uno de sus viajes fuera examinar un determinado jardín, en ocasiones jardines olvidados, dejados de la mano de Dios, abandonados a su suerte, y cuya gracia mi ilustre antepasado sabía encontrar entre tanta maleza y desidia” (1118));<sup>208</sup> the utility of what might appear to be narrowly specialized knowledge (“sus libritos, pese a su, ¿cómo llamarlo?, revestimiento botánico, están llenos de observaciones ingeniosas y a través de ellos uno puede hacerse una idea bastante aproximada de la Europa de su tiempo” (ibid.));<sup>209</sup> the possibility of committed literature (“humilde pero con buena prosa alemana, alzaba su voz contra la injusticia” (ibid.));<sup>210</sup> the relationship between the public and the private (“sobre la felicidad no dijo una palabra, supongo que porque la consideraba algo estrictamente privado y acaso, ¿cómo llamarlo?, pantanoso o movedizo” (ibid.)).<sup>211</sup> In sum, Alexander fürst Pückler’s speech gives us a short biography of his ancestor that is unapologetically biased and evaluative and that earnestly attempts to convey some of the complexity of a lifetime’s worth of work and experience. It’s a performance that feels faintly

<sup>207</sup> “‘Allow me to introduce myself,’ he said. ‘My name is Alexander Fürst Pückler. The, how shall I say, creator of this ice cream’ he said. ‘Was a forebear of mine, a very brilliant Fürst Pückler, a great traveler, an enlightened man, whose main interest were botany and gardening. Of course, he thought, if he ever thought about it at all, that he would be remembered for some of the many small works that he wrote and published.’” (892)

<sup>208</sup> “Made it seem as if the ultimate purpose of each of his trips was to examine a particular garden, gardens sometimes forgotten, forsaken, abandoned to their fate, and whose beauty my distinguished forebear knew how to find amid the weeds and neglect” (892)

<sup>209</sup> “His little books, despite their, how shall I say, botanical trappings, are full of clever observations and from them one gets a rather decent idea of the Europe of his day” (892)

<sup>210</sup> “humbly but in fine German prose, he raised his voice against injustice.” (892)

<sup>211</sup> “About happiness he said not a word, I suppose because he considered it something strictly private and perhaps, how shall I say, treacherous or elusive.” (892)

ridiculous insofar as it presumes that a complete stranger will be interested in these details and familiar with some of them (“el castillo de la familia, [está] ubicado, como usted sabrá, en las cercanías de Görlitz” (ibid.)),<sup>212</sup> but that also contains a great deal of charm, or at least poignancy, in its vindication of an admittedly minor writer, of a man whom his own descendant and biographer can’t seem to decide whether to depict as exceptional or merely representative of his age. The vocal tic that Bolaño gives him—his repetition of “¿cómo llamarlo?”—helps to define his idiolect and to perhaps distinguish him from the other characters in the book who give speeches such as this one, but it also connotes a certain care that he has in his speech. He’s not averse to speculation, but he’s also meticulous about distinguishing his inferences from what he knows to be factual.

This distinction is particularly important at the end of his speech, when he cycles back from listing all of the things his ancestor might be remembered for to thinking about how his ancestor is actually remembered:

Y probablemente, puesto que no era un santo ni siquiera un hombre valiente, sí pensó en la posteridad. En el busto, en la estatua ecuestre, en los infolios guardados para siempre en una biblioteca. Lo que no pensó jamás fue que pasaría a la historia por darle el nombre a una combinación de helados de tres sabores. (ibid.)<sup>213</sup>

For a brief moment and only in passing, Alexander fürst Pückler explicitly thinks in general terms rather than about the particularities of the life of his ancestor. He implies that it is a mark of saintliness or, at the very least, of bravery to not think about one’s renown. And I use that word advisedly because it’s *renombre*, the wide dissemination of one’s name and legacy, that matters to fürst Pückler. It’s not enough for a member of your family to know your life and work inside and out a century and a half on: what you want unless you’re heroically self-abnegating, he suggests, is official, institutional commemoration.

This, of course, stands in sharp contrast to the kind of personal, private memorialization that we’ve seen throughout *2666*. Whether it’s Amalfitano choosing his minor philosopher from among the greats, Florita’s communion with Benito Juárez and Leopardi, or Archiboldi himself reading Ansky’s notebooks and then restoring them to the hiding place where he found them, the kind of tribute that seems to matter most in the world of the novel is paid by one individual to another. This belief is most clearly formulated in another of Bolaño’s works, *Distant Star*, in a passage about the passionate allegiance that the Chilean poet Juan Stein feels for a man who may or may not be his ancestor, the great—greatest to Stein—Soviet general Ivan Cherniakovski.<sup>214</sup> After giving us pages of breathless description of Cherniakovski’s military exploits, which he either learned from Stein or researched because of Stein, and casting doubt on whether any of the monuments dedicated to the general are still assigned to him,<sup>215</sup> the Bolaño-like narrator of the novel asserts the following:

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<sup>212</sup> “the family castle, located near Görlitz, as you’re likely aware” (892)

<sup>213</sup> “And since he wasn’t a saint or even a brave man, he probably did think about prosperity. The bust, the equestrian statue, the folios preserved forever in a library. What he never imagined was that he would be forever remembered for lending his name to a combination of three flavors of ice cream.” (892; translation modified)

<sup>214</sup> Who is a Ukrainian Jew like Boris Ansky. Both *2666* and *Distant Star* are far more deeply invested in the legacy of Nazism and fascism, but both novels also contain these important moments of opening out to the Soviet Union.

<sup>215</sup> The final, wry turn towards bathos taken by this speech is clinched by a citation of Nicanor Parra’s “Total Cero”: “En fin, como dice Bibiano citando a Parra: así pasa la gloria del mundo, sin gloria, sin mundo sin un miserable sándwich de mortadela” (62).

Pero lo cierto es que el retrato de Cherniakovski, enmarcado con una cierta ampulosidad, estaba allí, en la casa de Juan Stein, y eso probablemente fuera mucho más importante (me atrevería a decir que infinitamente más importante) que los bustos y las ciudades con su nombre y las innumerables calles Cherniakovski mal asfaltadas de Ucrania, Bielorrusia, Lituania y Rusia. (62)<sup>216</sup>

“Probablemente fuera,” “me atrevería a decir,”—the narrator of *Distant Star* has to talk himself into this hyperbole, but his assertion of the value of the private, personal memorial is all the more powerful for it. Part of his reason for believing in this is his general distrust of the state in general and post-Soviet governments in particular, but it’s not just the incapacity of these institutions that bothers him; he seems to feel that those place have too obvious a claim on him, or rather, that he has too large a claim on them: they owe him too much because he helped to preserve them during the war. Juan Stein’s tribute, on the other hand, is comparatively freely given. He admires Cherniakovski because he feels a connection to him as a Jew and because he may be very loosely related to him by blood, but he also maintains that he in an objective sense deserves to be recognized as the greatest strategist of World War II. It’s Stein’s unsolicited assessment as an autodidact and enthusiast, backed by a barrage of facts about the deployment of armies and divisions, that takes up these pages of *Distant Star*. Stein might not be a Cherniakovski, and he might be far less invested in the public recognition of his hero’s name than Alexander fürst Pückler is in how his ancestor is remembered, but both men have clearly put in the hours of reading and research needed to familiarize themselves with the lives and works of those whom they champion.

Given how predominant the Steinian private mode of remembrance is in Bolaño’s oeuvre all the way through *2666*, one might want to dismiss fürst Pückler’s claim that only the singularly brave or selfless can forgo thinking about a public legacy but, then again, almost everyone who’s privately remembered by one of Bolaño’s characters *is* a kind of hero. What fürst Pückler returns us to with his insistence on the small, worthy, but more-representative-than-extraordinary work of his ancestor is the problem of the minor or forgettable writer. Like the minor writers whom the old man in Cologne excoriates for being mere copies of the true greats and the obscure philosophers whom Amalfitano identifies with so deeply,<sup>217</sup> the first Fürst Pückler is remembered by sheer happenstance, for purely contingent reasons, and this seems to cut his descendant, whom we can imagine is projecting his own feelings of insignificance back in time, to the quick. All we know about Alexander fürst Pückler, beyond what we can glean about his background and the confidence with which he speaks about literature and history in his speech about his ancestor, is that he’s quite old—at the very end of the scene, before he asks Archimboldi for the second and last time what he makes of his ancestor’s strange legacy, we see the following: “El caballero suspiró, debía de rondar los setenta años” (1119).<sup>218</sup> As the novel wraps up—all that’s left is Archimboldi’s polite, perfunctory answer that yes, that legacy is mysterious, and then the announcement of his departure for Mexico—we’re invited to think about the story of an entire life and the mystery of what any of us might leave behind.

<sup>216</sup> “In any case, on the wall of Juan Stein’s house, there hung a rather ornately framed portrait of Chernyakhovsky, and that, I dare say, was immeasurably more important than the busts and the cities named after him and the countless Chernyakhovsky Streets, full of potholes, scattered through the Ukraine, Belorussia, Lithuania and Russia.” (53)

<sup>217</sup> The paradigmatic instance is Guyau, the “French Nietzsche” who is kept from oblivion by the memory of no more than ten people.

<sup>218</sup> “The gentleman sighed, he must have been about seventy” (893)

The weighty confrontation with mortality, of course, happens only because of the widely beloved ice cream combination that has come down to us as Fürst Pückler's true public legacy. Thoughts of whether and how our names and stories might resonate after our deaths are made possible because we're capable of enjoying an especially ephemeral treat that Alexander Fürst Pückler points out, in a gesture that demonstrates that his punctiliousness extends beyond his genealogical obsessions, is especially good in the spring and fall rather than in the summer, when it might be too cloying and when sorbets are preferable. He may repeatedly request that Archimboldi validate his belief that this ice cream-based familial legacy is absurd or "mysterious," but this gentleman feels at least some pride in what his name has come to stand for. And perhaps he well should. As we've seen between Barry Seaman's and Sor Juana's recipes, the dissemination of knowledge about food is one of those things that bring people together in the world of *2666*. And the idea of combination that this trio of flavors represents has a great meta-literary value for the novel as well. From Florita's admonitions about eating healthy food to Barry Seaman's combination of warnings about bad eating habits and recipes for pork chops and duck to the sweets of Sor Juana and Fürst Pückler, the novel effectively covers several distinct approaches to food. In all these instances, however, food is something that connects an individual back to a tradition, whether familial—as with Seaman and Fürst Pückler—or literary—as with Morini and Marino and the London beggar all fascinated by Sor Juana's cooking. As an essential and democratic element of life, it allows for conversation between strangers and provides a ready topic of interest for lecturers speaking to wide audiences. And unlike institutional forms of culture, and much like literature itself, it can circulate from individual to individual without institutional mediation.

### **Stars of the Sea**

But gastronomy is not the only kind of knowledge that recurs throughout the novel, providing solace and wonder to those who turn to it. The fourth and most wide-ranging section of Barry Seaman's sermon, which follows the one on food, is titled "ESTRELLAS" and contains his thoughts not only on the heavenly bodies but also on the many things that we figuratively refer to as stars. Before closely scrutinizing the more general, philosophical remarks that Seaman makes in this section, I want to turn to the moment in which he brings up Marius Newell one more time, for it invokes the novel's fascination with marine biology, with amphibiousness, with the borders between the vegetable and the animal. The last time Seaman referred to Newell, he was standing at the edge of a Central Coast cliff, thinking about the sea as the embodiment of danger. This time Seaman recounts that Newell had an uncanny ability to find starfish on his beach walks. Seaman mentions that, rather like their celestial counterparts, sea stars are often dead when we can actually see them, when they're washed up on the beach, all by way of set up to a curious anecdote about the one time that Newell took a live starfish home instead of returning it to the sea. The anecdote centers on how, early in the Panthers' era, Newell, Seaman, and "little Nelson Sánchez"—the Spanish-language name feels important, a signifier of black-brown solidarity—stole an aquarium motor from a specialty store found in the white town of Colchester Sun. They're caught in the act by the shotgun-wielding owner or watchman of the establishment, who takes aim at them and sees them to their car and eventually lets them go, perhaps flummoxed or placated by Newell's insistence that he not shoot, that "it's for my starfish" (322).

Seaman wraps up this story by telling his audience that, "of course," the aquarium motor turned out to be worthless and that, shortly after the adventure, Newell's pet starfish ended up in

the trash, but the outcome matters far less than the conjunction of intense interest in the starfish with the Panthers' struggle. Seaman folds in references to how the Panthers took transit cop duties upon themselves once their local municipality refused to install traffic lights in their neighborhood despite the risk that speeding cars posed to the local children. The need to travel to a white neighborhood in order to find the necessary gear to keep the starfish alive and the confrontation with the aquarium shop's owner are also fraught moments. The shocking and potentially sentimental dimensions of these instances of racial animosity and conflict are distorted, if not obscured, by the weirdness of the starfish plot. The outlandishness of the starfish, treated with such understated self-evidence by Seaman, is disarming, almost literally in the case of the aquarium shop owner, whose motives for hanging fire we can only speculate about but which might well involve some level of empathy or respect for a man willing to risk himself for a starfish, even if that man might appear to be a racial enemy. Once more a shared interest in something bizarre serves as a point of convergence for unlikely strangers in the novel.<sup>219</sup>

Marine life is also at the very origin of the literary career of the man whose restless wanderings and encounters with all manner of strangers will dominate the final part of *2666*: Archiboldi. One of the very first things we learn about Hans Reiter once we're introduced to him in his own section is that loves the sea, but not what mere mortals ("el común de los mortales") take for the sea, its surface; rather, he likes its depths: "lo que le gustaba era el fondo del mar, esa otra tierra, llena de planicies que no eran planicies y valles que no eran valles y precipicios que no eran precipicios" (797).<sup>220</sup> By the time he's just six years old he's already a serious diver and at that very age he steals a book "for the first time" (ibid.). The paragraph that describes the way in which the boy experiences the underwater world through the lens of that book is worth quoting in full because it's a wonderful description of deep reading as discovery, of the combination of—as opposed to the disjunction between—bookish and "real-world" exploration:

El libro *Algunos animales y plantas del litoral europeo* lo tenía dentro de la cabeza, como suele decirse, y mientras buceaba iba pasando páginas lentamente. Así descubrió a la *Laminaria digitata*, que es un alga de gran tamaño, compuesta por un tallo robusto y una hoja ancha, tal como decía el libro, en forma de abanico de donde salían numerosas secciones en tiras que parecían, en realidad, dedos. La *Laminaria digitata* es un alga de mares fríos como el Báltico, el Mar del Norte y el Atlántico. Se la encuentra en grandes grupos, en el nivel más bajo de la marea y bajo las costas rocosas. La marea baja suele dejar al descubierto bosques de estas algas. Cuando Hans Reiter vio por primera vez un bosque de algas se emocionó tanto que se puso a llorar debajo del agua. Esto parece difícil, que un ser humano llore mientras bucea con los ojos abiertos, pero no olvidemos que Hans tenía entonces sólo seis años y que en cierta forma era un niño singular. (799-800)<sup>221</sup>

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<sup>219</sup> Newell and the shop owner might share more than just an interest in marine life. Seaman slows down and lavishes particular detail to his narration of the getaway outside the shop. While he demands that their wheelman "little Nelson" hurry up and speed away, Newell holds his nerve and asks Nelson to not panic and to roll slowly away so as not to spook the man who's slowly following their car with his shotgun trained in them.

<sup>220</sup> "What he liked was the seabed, that other earth, with its plains that weren't plains and valleys that weren't valleys and cliffs that weren't cliffs." (639)

<sup>221</sup> "The book *Animals and Plants of the European Coastal Region* was stamped on his brain, and while he dove he would slowly page through it. This was how he discovered *Laminaria digitate*, a giant seaweed with a sturdy stem and broad leaves, as the book said, shaped like a fan with numerous sections of strands that really did look like

This passage, like this section and the novel as a whole, is self-consciously about Reiter's extraordinariness, but in teaching us about a particular kind of seaweed that exists in the world, it addresses that broad readership unfamiliar with the *Laminaria digitata*. The description of the seaweed is perfectly poised between the technical—that Latin name—and the folksy—those parts that “really look like fingers.” Little Hans might be carrying out his investigations all alone, but the confirmation that others—whoever they are, we never know their names—have seen these natural wonders and taken the time to give them careful names must make him feel less alone. This might account for the overwhelming emotion he feels when he sees that seaweed forest for the first time: perhaps it's not just its manifest beauty that wrings those underwater tears from him; perhaps he also first encounters it in his book: the passage's brief digression into textbook-speak immediately before its account of his discovery certainly suggests as much. This paragraph is followed by one that describes two more species of seaweed, both quite similar to *Laminaria digitata*, which live in the depths and which the young writer can't see but can only “hallucinate, over there in the depths, a still and silent forest” (800). The knowledge found in his book exceeds what he can experience first-hand and provides fodder for his imagination.

And it's not just the descriptions of these aquatic plants that leave an indelible impression on the boy. The beauty of their Latin names matters, too. All the way at the other end of 2666, on the novel's third page, we learn that one of Archimboldi's novels is entitled *Bifurcaria bifurcata*. The titles of Archimboldi's many works constitute the novel's first and most mysterious miscellaneous list of proper names.<sup>222</sup> With a few exceptions, like the list of Sor Juana's recipes, these lists tend to contain a small quota of glossing or annotation, but Archimboldi's novels are left almost wholly unexamined, tiny gems of one to four words fit to be appreciated for their sonorousness and little more.<sup>223</sup> (I want to mark the importance of the aesthetic effect of these names now because it will come into play once the distinction between literary and non-literary works arises slightly later in the young Archimboldi's *Bildungsweg*). Like Florita Almada's varieties of magical thinking or Elvira Campos's phobias, the various kinds of seaweeds appear one after another, with capsule descriptions of what they're like and where they're to be found. More than any specific species, what seems to matter to Hans is their profusion and their variety: “Por esa época comenzó a dibujar en un cuaderno todo tipo de algas” (800).<sup>224</sup> Bolaño's prose in this enumeration again combines the textbook names and measurements and general information with the kind of eyeball descriptions that the boy might well make of his own accord were he capable of articulating them.

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fingers. *Laminaria digitata* is native to cold waters like the Baltic, the North Sea, and the Atlantic. It's found in large masses, at low tide, and off rocky shores. The tide often uncovers forests of this seaweed. When Hans Reiter saw a seaweed forest for the first time he was so moved he began to cry underwater. It may be hard to believe that a human being could cry while diving with his eyes open, but let us not forget that Hans was only six at the time and in a sense he was a singular child.” (641)

<sup>222</sup> It's worth remembering that in *Los sinsabores del verdadero policía*, that early version of 2666, the plots of the French novelist J.M.G. Arcimboldi's avant-garde novels are given an entire central section in which they're described breathlessly in bursts of a few pages or so. The closest analog for this kind of miniaturization of a full-scale novel in 2666 is the account of the science fiction novel written by Boris Ansky.

<sup>223</sup> It's not for a thousand pages that we learn anything about *Bifurcaria bifurcata* and then all we really find out is that it was written while during an Alpine trip intended to help Archimboldi's wife Ingeborg's tuberculosis, that it's plot “iba de algas,” is somehow “about seaweed,” and that Archimboldi's editor Bubis doesn't care for it once it's delivered to him for publication (1031ff.).

<sup>224</sup> “Around this time he began to draw all kinds of seaweed in a notebook.” (641)

Slowly, however, the geographical scope of the seaweed collection expands beyond the Northern cold-water climes that the boy knows firsthand, and this eventually allows for quick segue into another kind of taxonomy, a far less peaceful one that also has tremendous resonance for the novel as a whole. The catalog of seaweed ends with a note about how *Porphyra umbilicalis* is often eaten by the Welsh; the very beginning of the novel's next fragment opens a new catalog, not the product of the boy's peaceable reading and exploration but rather of his war-veteran father's bigotry. It opens "—Los galeses son unos cerdos —dijo el cojo a una pregunta de su hijo—. Unos cerdos absolutos. Los ingleses también son unos cerdos, pero un poco menos que los galeses..." (801),<sup>225</sup> and goes on in that vein for a good couple of pages, excoriating the many peoples of Europe, and even the European populations of North America, for their differing degrees of porcine identity. The "lame one's" rant—and Reiter's father is always referred to as *el cojo*, just as his mother is referred to as *la tuerta*, the one-eyed woman—is actually a brief against the ostensible diversity of the European people. He warns his son that the many foreigners he might encounter might appear to him to resemble chickens or dogs but that deep down they're all nothing more than pigs. It's certainly an outburst of hate, an outpouring of the kind of racial supremacism (Prussians turn out to be the only men among dirty beasts) that will decisively shape Hans Reiter's life when he goes off to fight in his own World War, but formally it's another impressive performance of encyclopedic cataloging.<sup>226</sup> Hans's father is not a bookish man, but he seems to be a curious one, at least up to a point. In the most absurd moment of his rant, Mexico makes its requisite appearance: "[Los serbios] son como cerdos disfrazados de perros chihuahuas. Los perros chihuahuas son unos perros enanos, del tamaño de un gorrión, que viven en el norte de México y que aparecen en algunas películas americanas. Los americanos son unos cerdos, por supuesto..." (802).<sup>227</sup> This reminds us that the catalog isn't necessarily reserved for scenes of happy instruction, that it can be wielded by anyone. And by its end, the lame one's hateful catalog undergoes two transformations: first into a lament for the Prussia he feels is lost, which he envisions by wondering why he can no longer see Prussian ships anchored off the coast near his home, and then into a touching account of watching Hans's diving excursions from a rock on the beach. He may not be able to see the Prussian ships anymore, but he can see his son instead and never fears for him, for he knows the waters can't hurt him. Once again, a massive question of lost belief in a nation is dissolved into an impregnable faith in a single individual.

As we've examined time and again, the boy who will become Archimboldi is represented as a born listener throughout his part of 2666. His father is the first in a long line of people whom he will either listen to or read attentively and who will presumably influence the work that will make him a cult writer throughout Europe. One of the only things we know about this work when we first encounter it in the novel's very first paragraph is that it's multinational in scope: that *The Garden* has an English theme, *D'Arsonval* a French theme, and so on. The wandering that will mark his life, the way he will not feel at home in Germany or anywhere else, also feels like a later rejection of his father's intense nationalism. But those implicit rebukes come much

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<sup>225</sup> "'The Welsh are swine,' said the one-legged man in reply to a question from his son. 'Absolute swine. The English are swine too, but not as bad as the Welsh.'" (642)

<sup>226</sup> In Bolaño's work it resembles nothing so much as the taxonomy of poets as homosexual types that appears both in *Los sinsabores* and later in *Los detectives salvajes* as the creation of Ernesto San Epifanio.

<sup>227</sup> "[the Serbs] are like swine disguised as Chihuahuas. Chihuahuas are tiny dogs, the size of a sparrow, that live in the North of Mexico and are seen in some American movies. Americans are swine, of course." (642)

later. At the outset of his part of the novel he says nothing at all to his father; he merely keeps diving and exploring the seacoast.

And he understands virtually everything, from the neighboring towns to his baby sister Lotte—“tal vez fue la primera persona que vivía en la superficie de la tierra que interesó (o que conmovió) a Hans Reiter” (809)<sup>228</sup>—by reference to the aquatic flora and fauna he knows from his diving and from his book. He almost drowns, suffers from a severe speech impediment, and fails out of school at age thirteen, a piece of news that’s interrupted by an extended fantasia about how Hans’s boredom with school means that he has to entertain himself while on “the path,” a path that for him is “vertical”:

una prolongada caída hacia el fondo del mar en donde todo, los árboles, la hierba, los pantanos, los animales, los cercados, se transformaba en insectos marinos o en crustáceos, en vida suspendida y *ajena*, en estrellas de mar y en arañas de mar, cuyo cuerpo, lo sabía el joven Reiter, es tan minúsculo que en él no cabe el estómago del animal... (810; emphasis in the original)<sup>229</sup>

The passage goes on like this for quite a bit longer, piling up facts along with the boy’s fanciful beliefs about sea spiders, and telling us how he speaks out loud to himself, answering his own questions about the critters. Every meaningful form of education represented in *2666*, even those that truly matter to the tenured Archimboldian academics in Part One, occurs outside of traditional academic settings. The very young Hans’s is no different in this regard; it just happens at a much younger age and in the strange, fairy tale setting of a seaside Prussian town that seems to exist both in a folkloric past—none of the nearby towns have proper names but are known as The Town of the Talkative Girls and The Town of the Fat People, The Pig Village and The Egg Village, and so forth—and in a precise historical moment: Hans abandons school in 1933, the year Hitler seizes power, as the book explicitly reminds us. In this context, Hans’s obsession with the sea constitutes a kind of rebellion, a pledge of fealty to an alternate world made possible by a literal sea change, where everything is transformed utterly. And it is a nonfiction book, a textbook, and the seemingly random and useless facts contained within it, which makes Hans’s small stretch of coastal shelf feel like a complete world.

### Filling Lacunae

Hans’s world expands considerably when he drops out of school completely and begins to serve as a cleaner in the decrepit house of a Prussian nobleman, where he’s befriended, just about (“Se podría decir, estirando mucho el término, que Halder fue el primer amigo que tuvo Hans Reiter” (819)),<sup>230</sup> by that nobleman’s dissolute son, Hugo Halder. Halder’s a big reader and the first intellectual whom Hans encounters. Early on in their relationship Halder asks Hans if he’s ever read a good book. When Hans tells him that he has and mentions his aquatic textbook, Halder lectures him on the virtues of great literature. Halder’s lessons, and Hans’s retorts, are worth quoting in full:

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<sup>228</sup> “she might have been the first person on the surface of the earth who interested (or moved) Hans Reiter.” (648)

<sup>229</sup> “a prolonged fall toward the bottom of the sea where everything, trees, grass, swamps, animals, fences, was transformed into marine insects or crustaceans, into suspended and *remote* forms of life, into starfish and sea spiders, whose bodies, the young Reiter knew, were so tiny that the animal’s stomach didn’t fit inside...” (649)

<sup>230</sup> “Speaking very loosely, one might call Halder Hans Reiter’s first friend.” (656)



Halder dijo que ése seguramente era un libro divulgativo y que él se refería a un buen libro literario. Hans Reiter dijo que no sabía cuál era la diferencia entre un buen libro ditivo (divulgativo) y un buen libro liario (literario). Halder le dijo que la diferencia consistía en la belleza, en la belleza de la historia que se contaba y en la belleza de las palabras con que se contaba esa historia. Acto seguido comenzó a ponerle ejemplos. Le habló de Goethe y de Schiller, le habló de Hölderlin y de Kleist, le habló maravillas de Novalis. Le dijo que él había leído a todos esos autores y que cada vez que los releía volvía a llorar.

—A llorar —dijo—, a llorar, ¿lo comprendes, Hans?

A lo que Hans dijo que él nunca lo había visto con un libro de esos autores, sino con libros de historia. La respuesta de Halder lo pilló por sorpresa. Halder dijo:

—Es que no estoy bien de historia y debo ponerme al día.

—¿Para qué? —dijo Hans Reiter.

—Para rellenar una laguna.

—Las lagunas no se rellenan —dijo Hans Reiter.

—Sí se rellenan —dijo Halder—, con un poco de esfuerzo todo se rellena en este mundo. Cuando yo tenía tu edad —dijo Halder, una exageración evidente—, leí a Goethe hasta el hartazgo, aunque Goethe, por supuesto, es infinito, en fin, leí a Goethe, a Eichendorff, a Hoffman, y descuidé mis estudios de historia, que también son necesarios, como quien dice, para afilar el cuchillo por ambos lados. (820)<sup>231</sup>

This might begin as a lecture given by a learned young aristocrat to an ignorant villager hearing the word “literary” and being introduced to the literary world for the first time, but it eventually turns into an exchange between—to use a classically Germanic distinction—between naïve and sentimental readers. Halder isn’t merely trying to assert himself over Hans; however much he bluffs about how much he’s read, he at least possesses a kernel of enthusiasm for the German canon, and he also imparts a couple of ideas about the differences between the literary and the informational and about the need for well-rounded reading. These ideas are more interesting than his devotion to the most canonical of German writers. His insistence that what distinguishes the literary from the non- is fundamentally aesthetic rather than related to content or subject matter is odd but perhaps sets him up as the spokesman for a Romantic sensibility that prizes aesthetic experience above Enlightenment clarity. (He does rave about Novalis, after all.) At the same

<sup>231</sup> “Halder said that must be a reference book and he meant a good literary book. Hans Reiter said he didn’t know the difference between a good refints (reference) book and a good litchy (literary) book. Halder said the difference lay in beauty, in the beauty of the story and the beauty of the language in which the story was told. Immediately he began to cite examples. He talked about Goethe and Schiller, he talked about Hölderlin and Kleist, he raved about Novalis. He said he had read all these authors and each time he reread them he wept.

‘Wept,’ he said, ‘wept, do you understand, Hans?’

To which Hans Reiter replied that the only books he had seen Halder with were history books. Halder’s answer took him by surprise. Halder said:

‘It’s because I don’t have a proper grasp of history and I need to brush up.’

‘What for?’ asked Hans Reiter.

‘To fill a lagoon.’

‘Lagoons can’t be filled,’ said Hans Reiter.

‘Yes they can be,’ said Halder, ‘with a little effort everything in this world can be filled. When I was your age,’ said Halder, clearly exaggerating. ‘I read Goethe until I couldn’t read anymore (although Goethe, of course, is infinite), but anyway, I read Goethe, Eichendorff, Hoffman, and I neglected my studies of history, which are also needed in order to hone both edges of the blade, so to speak.’ (657)

time, the obsessive reading of history that Halder's been carrying out—Hans has observed it before and, curiously enough, he's found it “repulsive”—and his later recommendation of it, suggest that he's invested in more than just aesthetic experience and that, as his closing metaphor of a knife sharpened along two edges implies, he considers beauty and knowledge to be inextricably linked.

Despite Halder's flaunting of his cultural capital, Hans is not cowed, and he gives one of the earliest flashes of his rebarbative side. What seems to give him the confidence to speak out is his intimate knowledge of nature: when Halder uses the common trope of the lake, the *lacuna*, in order to describe the gap in his knowledge presented by history, Hans reasonably points out that lakes either are not, or should not, be filled. Halder assumes that Hans is picking up the figure of speech and expressing a lack of confidence in either his own or anyone's ability to fill the holes in one's knowledge, so he offers himself as an example of what can be accomplished through sheer effort. The figurative being taken literally, the self-importance of a young man lecturing to a slightly younger man about his salad days, the sentimental commitment to a national tradition: this scene is like something out of Lewis Carroll, and as with the *Alice* books, something far more serious is at stake. For all that it's expressed pompously, Halder's pep talk about filling gaps and gaining knowledge as a weapon is in keeping with the advice offered by many of the novel's radical readers. At the same time, Hans is already an otherworldly naïf whose remark about not filling lakes reads as much like a piece of gnomic wisdom as it does a misunderstanding of an idiom. It's in keeping with Hans's “repulsion” by Halder's reading of history, and representative of his broader rejection of town, school, even land, of his preference for the inhuman *ajeno* of the sea. As his education progresses Hans will indeed begin to read seriously, but his early suspicions will prove inexpugible: he'll never simply familiarize himself with the most familiar topographies of the historical and literary canons; he'll always occupy a peripheral role in relation to them.

Case in point, the book Hans reads and identifies with under Halder's tutelage is Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzifal*, a classic of medieval German literature that Halder explicitly, and strangely, claims isn't central to that canon (Friedrich von Hausen and Walther von der Vogelweide are named as two poets from that era who are “more important” than Wolfram). In fact, the explicitness of the passage that binds together Hans and Wolfram is striking. After a thousand pages of the formation of comparatively subtle or tangential—in the sense that one key feature is shared—relationships between individuals, 2666 tells, rather than shows, us that Hans Reiter and Wolfram von Eschenbach are kindred spirits. But, as with virtually all of the novel's literary judgments, this one is ascribed to the equivocal figure of Hugo Halder, who opens the passage that links Hans with Wolfram with the suggestion that his young protégé and the medieval poet are very similar but *not quite* the same. He says *Parzifal*, this book that Hans has chosen at random, is perfectly appropriate to him because, even though he “will never understand it,” “[Wolfram] era el autor en el que encontraría una más clara semejanza con él mismo o con su espíritu o con lo que él deseaba ser y, lamentablemente, no sería jamás, aunque sólo le faltara un poquito así, dijo Halder casi pegando las yemas de los dedos pulgar e índice” (822).<sup>232</sup>

What follows this caveat is a lesson in literary history, in the facts of Wolfram's life and world, that certainly comes from Halder but which is presented with a focus on the dazzled

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<sup>232</sup> “Wolfram von Eschenbach was the author in whom he would find the clearest resemblance to himself or his inner being or what he aspired to be, and, regrettably, never would become, though he might come this close, said Halder, holding his thumb and index finger a fraction of an inch apart.” (658)

student—the refrain that introduces each fact is “Wolfram, descubrió Hans”—rather than the lecturer, who disappears into his material and whose expertise about this particular figure isn’t called into question. And it’s Wolfram’s freedom from the cultural and educational institutions and authorities of his day, his status as a “lay and independent” knight—a phrase that’s repeated twice in succession, as if it were being savored and memorized—that appeals to the young dropout. Of course, this being *2666*, there’s an interpretative, psychologizing component to Halder’s discourse on Wolfram. At the moment in which he asserts Hausen and Vogelweide’s greater importance, he identifies precisely what sets Wolfram apart from his peers: “Pero la soberbia de Wolfram (*yo huía de las letras, yo no poseía artes*), una soberbia que da la espalda, una soberbia que dice *moríos, yo viviré*, le confiere un halo de misterio vertiginoso, de indiferencia atroz, que atrajo al joven Hans como un gigantesco imán atrae a un delgado clavo” (ibid.).<sup>233</sup> The free indirect style inhibits us from knowing who these words belong to, exactly, but they’re quite familiar from other moments in the novel, most notably from the many breathless descriptions of how Archimboldi’s work—but importantly not his biography, which they know nothing about—affects the critics in Part One.

It’s also momentarily unclear whether what’s acting on Hans like a force of nature is simply Halder’s account of Wolfram’s biography or whether he’s reading *Parzifal* on his own. Our doubts about that are laid to rest by the conclusion to the passage:

Y mientras Halder le contaba todas estas cosas de Wolfram, como si dijéramos para situarlo en el lugar del crimen. Hans leyó de principio a final el *Parsifal*, a veces en voz alta, mientras estaba en el campo o mientras recorría el camino que lo llevaba de su casa al trabajo, y no sólo lo entendió, sino que también le gustó. Y lo que más le gustó, lo que lo hizo llorar y retorcerse de risa, tirado sobre la hierba, fue que Parsifal en ocasiones cabalgaba (*mi estilo es la profesión del escudo*) llevando bajo su armadura su vestimenta de loco. (822-3)<sup>234</sup>

The intense relationship that Hans has with this, his second book, is much like the one he had with his first. Just as he recited the names and descriptions of the different aquatic plants and animals while diving into the sea, he recites Wolfram’s verses as he walks the German fields and heads to work in the country house of an ancient aristocratic family. And the reaction he has to it is just as tremendous: where the beauty of the seaweed forests made him cry, something about Parsifal’s holy folly absolutely delights him. This mysterious, but powerful, identification that the boy seems to feel with the errant poet and his knight<sup>235</sup> suggests that Halder is himself not quite right in his assessment of Hans: he clearly goes well beyond merely “understanding” the

<sup>233</sup> “But Wolfram’s pride (*I fled the pursuit of letters, I was untutored in the arts*), a pride that stands aloof, a pride that says *die, all of you, but I’ll live*, confers on him a halo of dizzying mystery, of terrible indifference, which attracted the young Hans the way a giant magnet attracts a slender nail.” (659)

<sup>234</sup> “And as Halder told Hans all these things about Wolfram, as if to place him at the scene of the crime, Hans read *Parzifal* from beginning to end, sometimes aloud, out in the fields or on his way along the path home from work, and not only did he understand it, he liked it. And what he liked most, what made him cry and roll laughing in the grass, was that Parzifal sometimes rode (*my hereditary office is the shield*) wearing his madman’s garb under his suit of armor.” (659)

<sup>235</sup> In their recent (2016) theatrical adaptation of *2666*, Robert Falls and Seth Bockley keep the scenes of the young Hans’s tutelage under Hugo Halder, but they swap out *Parzifal* for the *Quijote*. (They also include a line that explicitly claims that there’s no difference between literary and reference books.) As I make clear below, the way *Parzifal* is presented as the product of amoral indifference rather than as a cleaving to a more selfless chivalric ideal makes this an odd choice, as does the abandonment of the German for the Spanish literary tradition.

book in the sense of comprehending it on a basic level. It'd be wrong to dismiss Halder's role in Hans's literary education merely because he underestimates him, however. The way that Hans's discovery is presented suggests that all those "things about Wolfram" that Halder tells him matter a great deal—they dominate the passage, after all, far more than anything having to do with the epic of *Parzifal* itself.

And for all that it's coyly worded, that strange comparison of the writing of *Parzifal* to a crime ("le contaba todas estas cosas de Wolfram, como si dijéramos para situarlo en el lugar del crimen") also suggests that there is a close, even a logical, connection between biography and work. It puts Halder momentarily in the position of a Holmes or a Dupin who deduces that Wolfram had to be the man who authored *Parzifal*, that his peregrinations and his recklessness make him that book's only possible author. It's a curious moment because the passage doesn't voice any other doubt about the text's authorship. But the idea of writing as crime does logically flow from the rest of the passage: there's an electric amoral charge to Halder's evocation of Wolfram, to the sense that his indifference is so powerfully compelling because it falls so far outside the realm of acceptable attitudes and behaviors, that it's transgressive to the point of suggesting, if not quite murderousness, at least an inhuman or sociopathic callousness about death ("*moríos, yo viviré*"). The frisson of licentiousness added by this reference to a crime at the exact moment in which the passage pivots from Halder's riffs on Wolfram—which we've already been warned against taking all that seriously—to Hans's own guileless enthusiasm, feels especially important because it revisits the link between author and crime that the novel has hinted at from its beginning for the first time in this section. Hans's otherworldliness has felt pastorally benign up to this point, but suddenly we see him reveling in the conceit of a good Christian knight hiding his madness under his armor, and we might wonder what this boy might be capable of when he grows up.

The Wolfram-*Parzifal* passage also serves as a synecdoche for the Archimboldi section as a whole in the way that Hans appears to be a cipher for most of it only to show dramatic signs of life at its end. Because we never get to read as much as a line of his vaunted novels, Hans Reiter will always bear witness to displays of moralizing erudition like this one; he'll never produce them himself. This holds true all the way up to Alexander fürst Pückler's speech in the novel's last pages. For all that he is a writer, then, and that it is his writings that thread together so much of 2666, the Archimboldi that shines in his section is first and foremost a reader and a listener. He is sent to the frontlines in World War II, but he takes his book on marine biology with him and spends a considerable amount of time rereading it. And the most important event of his wartime experience is his reading of Boris Ansky's notebooks, a text that is itself studded with accounts of readerly discoveries. The result of this is that Archimboldi's de-mythification is only accomplished by half: we certainly know so much more about him than we do about Cesárea Tinajero, but he never gets to give an account of himself the way so many people he encounters do.

He almost seems to occupy some space in between the memorializers and the memorialized, which might be a good definition for so many of the major figures in this book—from Barry Seaman, who propagates the legend of Marius Newell while being himself observed by Oscar Fate and his broader audience, to Florita Almada to Boris Ansky to someone as marginal as Alexander Fürst Pückler, who holds our attention as the novel runs out of pages. And in all of these cases what we learn about are those interesting objects and facts that make up the world *inter esse*, in between all of these people. In many of these cases the facts have to do with the world of human creativity, with literature above all, but also with art and with food. But

sometimes those facts are also related to the mystery of the non-human world: to that which is outside the earthly plane, whether above it like the stars or below it in the ocean. And quite often, too, we see how culture and nature are intertwined in language and thought and experience, as with young Hans Reiter's shuttling back-and-forth between land and sea, learning about the underwater world through both physical exploration and reading or in Barry Seaman's catalog of the many kinds of stars—sports stars, movie stars, heavenly bodies, starfish—in the section of his sermon devoted to the category “ESTRELLAS.”

### Encyclopedic Love Among the Ruins

Questions of madness, knowledge, and belief also arise with the introduction of Ingeborg, the woman who will become his wife and great companion. He meets her by sheer coincidence—Hans is looking for Hugo Halder while on furlough and she's the oldest daughter of the family who has moved into Halder's old apartment—and as soon as she seeks him out and kisses him, he realizes from her “blind woman's look” that she's mad. Their subsequent conversation, which takes place, as these tend to, while they walk in a park, is one of the more curious encyclopedic set-pieces in the novel. When she tells him her name she immediately asks that he swear to her that he will never forget it. What follows is a combination of a game of twenty questions and another of the novel's great catalogs, as Hans tries to swear to Ingeborg by various people and sources of legitimacy and authority: God; his mother and father; the various military units that he belongs to, from his platoon to his army; love; honesty; beautiful natural phenomena—sunsets, starry nights, “diaphanous dawns” (868-9). Ingeborg rejects each in turn, expressing a gamut of reactions from neutral to contemptuous. When Hans proposes books, those infallible companions that Barry Seaman and Florita Almada claim never fail us, Ingeborg switches from assertion to articulation of her rejection:

¿Y [crees] en los libros? [–dijo Reiter.]

–Menos todavía –dijo la muchacha–, además en mi casa sólo hay libros nazis, política nazi, historia nazi, economía nazi, mitología nazi, poesía nazi, novelas nazi, obras de teatro nazi.

–No tenía idea que los nazis hubieran escrito tanto –dijo Reiter.

–Tú, por lo que veo, tienes idea de muy pocas cosas, Hans –dijo la muchacha– salvo de besarme.

–Es verdad –dijo Reiter, que siempre estaba bien dispuesto a admitir su ignorancia. (869)<sup>236</sup>

Ingeborg's meticulous listing of the different kinds of Nazi books that her family owns serves several functions: it gives us some sense of why she's rejected so many traditional sources of authority out of hand—hearth and home can hardly feel like a refuge when they're thoroughly colonized by that ideology; it offers a pointed reminder of the breadth of the Third Reich's totalitarian program, which the novel could well elide altogether given that it's focalized through

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<sup>236</sup> ““What about books?”

‘Even worse,’ said the girl, ‘and anyway in my house there are only Nazi books, Nazi politics, Nazi history, Nazi economics, Nazi mythology, Nazi poetry, Nazi novels, Nazi plays.’

‘I had no idea the Nazis had written so much,’ said Reiter.

‘As far as I can tell, you don't have much idea about anything, Hans,’ said the girl, ‘except kissing me.’

‘True,’ said Reiter, who was always ready to admit his ignorance.” (695-6)

a man so thoroughly alienated from his country's contemporary culture; and, perhaps paradoxically, it points to the very multiplicity of the category "book": her rejection of it might be absolute but it's the one proposal of Hans's that she accords the respect of unpacking into constituent parts. When she rejects parenthood earlier in their conversation and Hans protests that he isn't trying to forget that he has parents, she steamrolls him: "Tú también –dijo la muchacha–, y yo, y todo el mundo" (868).<sup>237</sup> Books might be ridiculous too, *more* ridiculous than the wonders of nature that Hans proposes just before, but by specifying which kinds she finds absurd, Ingeborg leaves open the possibility that at least some of them might contain something worth believing in.

This possibility is in fact borne out by Ingeborg's revelation of what she believes in, but not before Hans—who, we're told, no longer cares about finding Halder or Ingeborg's hidden sources of belief—takes another tack and "tentatively" lists things that might have particular meaning to her: "las hermanas de la muchacha y la ciudad de Berlín y la paz en el mundo y los niños del mundo y la ópera y los ríos de Europa y las imágenes, ay, de antiguos novios, y su propia vida (la de Ingeborg), y la amistad y el humor y todo cuanto se le ocurrió" only to have each proposal rejected out of hand (870).<sup>238</sup> This is quite the heterogeneous, "Aleph"-like list, and it includes most of the things that the characters of *2666* find solace in and inspiration from: family, friends, certain places,<sup>239</sup> even a sentimental appeal to the children of the world. Ingeborg's systematic rejection of all of these things raises the possibility that the madness that Hans sees in her extends to a nihilistic rejection of everything under the sun. It almost sets her up as a figure at an even greater remove than Hans from the rest of society, someone truly cut off from the social world around her.

Her answers, when they finally do arrive, also place her at that extreme because they both relate to the aesthetic limit-category of the sublime. Her first answer, "storms," is natural. As she specifies: "Sólo las grandes tormentas, cuando el cielo se vuelve negro y el aire se vuelve gris. Truenos, rayos y relámpagos y campesinos muertos al cruzar un potrero" (870).<sup>240</sup> Probably inadvertently, but perhaps not, given the bookish side she's about to reveal, Ingeborg evokes one of Kant's key examples of the dynamic sublime, down to the reference to life-threatening danger (Bolaño one-ups Kant by including a dead, rather than merely threatened, peasant). This is all that Ingeborg mentions, and the image is left there to resonate with the second thing that she believes in and which Hans, who we're told in passing doesn't care for storms, immediately asks her to identify. This image might be sketchy, but it's characteristic of the encyclopedism of *2666* that Ingeborg would believe in more than one thing. The whole novel operates by inclusion and by the suggestion that one thing is not enough to exhaust a person's commitments or attachments.

The other thing, in fact, the thing that Ingeborg expounds on in great detail, just happens to be the Aztecs. Hans knows nothing about them, so she introduces them by painting a picture with her words of their human sacrifices, which interest her above all. But this image she conjures up is avowedly a product of her imagination, a vision cobbled together from what must surely be her reading on the subject and a few personal experiences and preferences: she takes

<sup>237</sup> "'Yes, you,' said the girl, 'and me, and everyone.'" (695)

<sup>238</sup> "the girl's sisters and the city of Berlin and world peace and the children of the world and the opera and the rivers of Europe and the faces, dear God, of men she had loved and he own life (Ingeborg's), and feiendship and humor and everything he could think of" (696)

<sup>239</sup> One of Archimboldi's novels is entitled *Ríos de Europa*.

<sup>240</sup> "Only big storms, when the sky turns black and the air turns gray. Thunder, lightning, and peasants killed when they cross fields." (696)

the image of Lake Texcoco from a visit her vacationing family paid to Lake Lemana and, in the moment of greatest detail, when she's describing the stone upon which the sacrifices were conducted atop the pyramids, she asks Hans if he's ever seen an obsidian stone. When he answers that he hasn't, not consciously, she replies:

Te habrías dado cuenta en el acto –dijo la muchacha–. Una obsidiana es un feldespato negro o de un verde oscurísimo, cosa de por sí curiosa porque los feldespatos suelen ser de color blanco o amarillento. Los feldespatos más importantes son la ortosa, la albita y la labradorita, para que lo sepas. Pero mi feldespato preferido es la obsidiana. Bueno, sigamos con las pirámides... (872)<sup>241</sup>

This moment is worth singling out because it combines the purely informative textbook register with a highly subjective opinion and a complete assurance of the singularity of that kind of stone. It reads a lot like the kind of thing young Hans might say about the seaweeds he used to examine if he ever chose to describe them to anyone. It also stands out because it helps to anchor in the real world what Ingeborg is clearly presenting as an abstracted to cleaned-up version of what an Aztec sacrifice must have been like.

The distorted quality of that vision is in fact then symbolized by that very stone that she taxonomically categorizes in the above passage. The detail that she introduces to Hans as what will really surprise him is that the obsidian stone that serves as both the place on which the bloody sacrifices take place and as the filter on the skylight at the zenith of the pyramid (and the one source of illumination for the crowd gathered below) is *transparent*, and this means that the light within the pyramid goes from very dark gray to red to black as the sacrifice is carried out (873).<sup>242</sup> Ingeborg lavishes detail on the audience of the sacrifice, on their “hieratic” appearance—she's clearly fascinated by her imagined Aztecs' fascination—and the way that the changing light of the sacrifice “transfigures their features” and seems to “personalize” each one of them, to raise them up from a dark, undifferentiated mass. In her summing up, she refuses to name the sacrifice itself: “eso, en resumen, es todo, pero *eso* puede durar mucho tiempo, *eso* escapa del tiempo o se instala en otro tiempo, regido por otras leyes. Cuando los aztecas abandonan el interior de las pirámides la luz del sol no les hace daño. Se comportan como si hubiera un eclipse de sol” (ibid.).<sup>243</sup> Ingeborg considers the sacrifices purely as aesthetic phenomena. The quality of the light as filtered by stone and blood figures prominently whereas the victim is as incidental as the peasant killed by the storms that she also believes in. In both cases, Ingeborg also emphasizes that what compels her is the state of exception that both storms and sacrifices entail, the way they seem to momentarily abrogate the laws that govern ordinary reality.

In fact, the Aztecs in the pyramid are at a double remove from reality for Ingeborg. After describing the sacrifice, she gives a brief account of what “her” Aztecs do in their ordinary lives:

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<sup>241</sup> “‘You would have known it instantly,’ said the girl. ‘Obsidian is a black or very dark green feldspar, a curious thing in itself because feldspar tends to be white or yellowish. The most important kinds of feldspar, for your information, are orthoclase, albita, and labradorite, But the kind I like best is obsidian. Well, back to the pyramids.’” (698)

<sup>242</sup> The description of the audience witnessing this spectacle and the deployment of the word “hieratic” connect this scene to the one in “Fate” where a bunch of narcos watch snuff pornography in a *narcorancho*.

<sup>243</sup> “and that is essentially all, but *that* can last a long time, *that* exists outside of time, or in some other time, ruled by other laws. When the Aztecs came out of the pyramids, the sunlight didn't hurt them. They behaved as if there were an eclipse of the sun.” (698-9)

Y vuelven a sus quehaceres diarios, que consisten básicamente en pasear y bañarse y luego volver a pasear y quedarse mucho tiempo quietos contemplando cosas indiscernibles o estudiando los dibujos que hacen los insectos en la tierra y en comer acompañados de sus amigos, pero todos en silencio, que es casi lo mismo que comer solos, y de vez en cuando hacer la guerra. Y sobre el cielo siempre hay un eclipse que los acompaña. (ibid.)<sup>244</sup>

Ingeborg is self-aware about the thoroughgoing utopian—in the sense of impossible—nature of her vision. She opens her description of the Aztec people (which comes after her Borgesian description of their cities as a sublime profusion of gigantic pyramids) by saying that they're "a very strange people" with madness in their eyes who may or may not be living in an asylum (871-2), and she places them under that eclipse, a very symbol of the state of exception commonly associated with pre-Columbian Mesoamerica. But she's also presenting this vision as utopian in the sense of ideal. Having rejected all the conventional objects of belief that Hans proposed to her, she affirms this in loving detail as a form of life with a regard for nature, for aesthetics (not only is the Aztec architecture she describes striking, she also praises the ornamental nature of their dress), and for a silence, a wordless being-together.

It's as if she's describing an impossibly a-social society composed entirely of Archimboldis, and in fact, the future Archimboldi reacts enthusiastically to her vision: "–Vaya, vaya, vaya –dijo Reiter, que estaba impresionado con los conocimientos de su nueva amiga" (873).<sup>245</sup> That "well, well" is a typically inscrutable Archimboldian response in that it's really difficult to tell to what extent he's humoring Ingeborg—whom he might take to be one of the considerable number of cranks whom he listens to attentively—and to what extent he believes what she's saying and understands why the Aztecs mean so much to her. The narrator's statement that he's impressed by her knowledge, by her *plural* knowledge in the Spanish original (she knows many things about the Aztecs, not just one), suggests that he does take this to be more than mere fantasy.

In fact, he seems quite amenable to the form of silent companionship that closes Ingeborg's vision: "Durante un rato, sin proponérselo, ambos pasearon en silencio por aquel parque, como si fueran aztecas, hasta que la muchacha le preguntó por quién iba a jurar, si por los aztecas o por las tormentas" (ibid.).<sup>246</sup> Hans doesn't take this decision of what to swear by all that seriously—he even momentarily forgets what he's swearing to do—but he does choose the Aztecs, not so much out of a newfound fascination for them but because he doesn't like storms. Even given this deflated, comic ending in which the bewildered Hans goes through the motions while Ingeborg declares that his choice will "mark her destiny," this whole first encounter between these strange lovers exemplifies an ethos of attentiveness that, as we've seen, Archimboldi will carry into old age. His identity as an exemplary listener will, in fact, shift the course of his life later in the war when, after listening to a confession of mass murder by an Eichmann-like bureaucrat named Sammer, he strangles the man. It's a striking moment because

<sup>244</sup> "And they returned to their daily rounds, which basically consisted of strolling and bathing and then strolling again and spending a long time standing still in contemplation of imperceptible things or studying patterns insects made in the dirt and eating with friends, but always in silence, which is the same as eating alone, and every so often they made war. And above them in the sky there was always an eclipse." (699)

<sup>245</sup> "'Well, well, well,' said Reiter, impressed by his new friend's knowledge." (699)

<sup>246</sup> "For a while, without intending to, the pair walked in silence through the park, as if they were Aztecs, until the girl asked what he would swear by, Aztecs or storms." (699)



it confirms that for all that he appears abstracted and amoral and wholly nonjudgmental, he does care about what's told to him and is capable of, quite literally, taking justice into his own hands.

That extraordinary incident aside, what his attentiveness mostly entails is a form of deep connection with his fellow outcasts. Before rhapsodizing about the Aztecs, Ingeborg has, after all, systematically rejected every form of authority available to her. But something about that exotic, doomed civilization provides comfort for her the way that Leopardi does for Florita Almada or Voltaire for Barry Seaman. The entry for "Aztecs" in the encyclopedically rearranged version of *2666* would be quite different from those two: it would be focused on public spectacle as opposed to private withdrawal, and it would be arguably more distorted and reduced insofar as it imagines a society of silent viewers of sacrifice under a permanent eclipse. But at the same time, it takes one small thing about a person or people from an improbably remote historical conjuncture and identifies with it in a radical, sustaining way.

Which isn't to say that Ingeborg's archaic utopia has the same exemplary valence as the sustained courses of reading proposed by the seer and the Black Panther. In the end, the radical exclusivity of her commitment to the Aztecs violates the novel's central ethos of plurality and its commitment to the here and now. Ingeborg's desire to escape the strictures of a Nazi family in the middle of World War II makes a great deal of sense and, for all that her vision indulges in the aestheticization of violence, doesn't constitute an indictment in and of itself, but it feels incomplete, perhaps a product of her youthful inexperience. In the end, the models of encyclopedism in *2666* are all men and women who have accumulated their stores of motley knowledge over a lifetime.

So much of the pathos of Bolaño's fiction comes from this capacity of the old to reach a place inaccessible to the young. One of the stories that he tells over and over again is of the survivor who remembers a friend or comrade who died tragically young. Ingeborg will survive the war and will be reunited with Hans, only to die fairly young of tuberculosis. Unlike revolutionary young men like Boris Ansky and Marius Newell, she doesn't engage in radical political action but instead finds a way to survive, and to help her mother and sisters survive, by working as a prostitute. When she meets Hans again he fails to remember her name, thus breaking his vow, but they eventually form a community of two that captures much of the plural ethos that we've been examining:

Pasaban muchas horas juntos, a veces hablando de los temas más peregrinos, a veces Reiter sentado a la mesa escribiendo en un cuaderno de tapas de color caña su primera novela e Ingeborg sentada en la cama, leyendo. El aseo de la casa lo solía hacer Reiter, así como también las compras, e Ingeborg se ocupaba de cocinar, algo que se le daba bastante bien. Las conversaciones de sobremesa eran extrañas y en ocasiones se convertían en largos monólogos o en soliloquios o en confesiones.

Hablaban de libros, de poesía (Ingeborg le preguntaba a Reiter porque no escribía poesía y Reiter le contestaba que la poesía, en cualquiera de sus múltiples disciplinas, estaba contenida o podía estar contenida, en una novela), de sexo (habían hecho el amor de todas la maneras posibles, o eso creían, y teorizaban sobre nuevas maneras pero sólo hallaban la muerte), y de la muerte. (968-9)<sup>247</sup>

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<sup>247</sup> "They spent many hours together, sometimes talking about the most random things, or sometimes with Reiter at the table writing his first novel in a notebook with a cane-colored cover and Ingeborg lying in bed, reading. It was Reiter who usually did the housecleaning and shopping, and Ingeborg cooked, which was something she was quite

This description of catholic, extravagant conversation matches something we see all throughout *2666* but that is almost always restricted to the first encounters between strangers, to strange encounters in gardens or to secular sermons delivered in churches or over television. When it's restricted to this private sphere, however, the content of this kind of talk is elided almost completely. We do see Hans's confession of the murder of Sammer unspool over the next few pages, but Ingeborg never again gets a monologue of the kind she delivered about the Aztecs (and, though it probably goes without saying by this point, Hans *never* speaks at such length). One lesson we can draw from this kind of submergence of errant speech is that the novel holds it particularly appropriate for that semi-public space between strangers or for the wholly private sphere of dreams, but it's not the kind of thing we need to really overhear between lovers or close friends.

And then there's that great parenthetical definition of poetry, which serves as a defense of the novel's inclusiveness as much as Amalfitano's great defense of "great, torrential" works over the small and perfect ones. The key is that it asserts poetry as a plural phenomenon, composed of "multiple disciplines," *all* of which have been, or can be, contained within a novel. *2666* is a novel that, in a simple, formal sense, cites no verse but that incorporates different kinds of discourse into itself. Remember that Hugo Halder's lesson to Hans Reiter, the very first the future writer ever receives, holds that the difference between "literary" and "informational" (*divulgativo*) books is aesthetic or formal rather than content-based: the former are more beautiful in plot or prose. Reiter seems to be making a claim not too far from that here with his Bakhtinian defense of the novel as the genre or mode or form that can take in every mode of poetry. And as we've seen throughout this chapter, many of the novel's moments that we might take as the most poetic are inextricable from the moments that are most informational—taken at the level of the speech or passage, Halder's two modes are blended with each other, the epic of a new Parzifal is pockmarked with information from books much like *Some plants and animals of the European littoral region*. And the kinds of things that are shared in common between complete strangers include the most "peregrine" facts, whether outlandish or practical. In the novel's terrifying vision of social atomization, what solitary individuals are capable of sharing are these facts related to categories that we all have in common, whether Barry Seaman's danger, money, food, stars, and usefulness or Hans and Ingeborg's books, poetry, sex, and death.

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good at. Their after-supper conversations were strange and on occasion turned into monologues or soliloquies or confessions.

They talked about books, about poetry (Ingeborg asked Reiter why he didn't write poetry and he answered that all poetry, in any of its multiple disciplines, was contained or could be contained in fiction), about sex (they had made love in every possible way, or so they believed, and they theorized about new ways, but came up only with death), and death." (774-5; translation modified)

### Coda: Poetry Between Cardenal and Parra

Having stuck especially close to *2666* for the length of this final chapter, I want to close with an opening out, with a brief move from the novel form to poetry, and from Bolaño to two of his great literary heroes: Ernesto Cardenal and Nicanor Parra. This consideration of the entanglement of ethics and poetics won't take up the "multiple disciplines of poetry" that Hans alludes to—it'll reckon with just two of them—but it will use the language of these fellow poets in order to sum up the ambivalent attitude towards engagement with the social world that literature in the vein of *2666* demands.

I reach for these two poets in particular because at an early stage in the creation of what would come to be *2666*, Bolaño held them up as critical, competing archetypes. In *Los sinsabores del verdadero policía*, that trial run for *2666*, an earlier, more conventionally professorial, version of Amalfitano offers the following lesson on Latin American literary history:

Durante una de sus clases, Amalfitano dijo: la poesía moderna latinoamericana nace con dos poemas. El primero es el "Soliloquio del Individuo" de Nicanor Parra, publicado en los *Poemas y antipoemas*, Editorial Nascimento, Chile, 1954. El segundo es el "Viaje a Nueva York," de Ernesto Cardenal, publicado en una revista del D.F. a mitad de los setenta (creo que en 1974, pero no me hagan demasiado caso) y que yo tengo en la *Antología* de Ernesto Cardenal de la Editorial Laia, Barcelona, 1978. Por supuesto, Cardenal había escrito antes "Hora 0", los "Salmos", el "Homenaje a los Indios Americanos" y las "Coplas a la muerte de Merton", pero es el "Viaje a Nueva York" el que, a mi parecer, marca el punto de inflexión, la bifurcación definitiva del camino. Ambos textos, el "Soliloquio" y el "Viaje", son las dos caras de la poesía moderna, el demonio y el ángel, respectivamente (y no olvidemos, como dato curioso, pero tal vez un poco más que eso, que en el "Viaje" Ernesto Cardenal menciona a Nicanor Parra), acaso el momento más lúcido y terrible y a partir del cual el cielo se oscurece y comienza la tormenta.

Los que no estén de acuerdo que se queden sentados esperando a don Horacio Tregua, los que estén de acuerdo que me sigan. (130)<sup>248</sup>

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<sup>248</sup> "In one of his classes, Amalfitano said: the birth of modern Latin American poetry is marked by two poems. The first is 'The Soliloquy of the Individual,' by Nicanor Parra, published in *Poemas y antipoemas*, Editorial Nascimento, Chile, 1954. The second is "Trip to New York," by Ernesto Cardenal, published in a Mexico City magazine in the mid '70s (!1974, I think, but don't quote me on that) which I have in Ernesto Cardenal's *Antología*, Editorial Laia, Barcelona, 1978. Of course, Cardenal had already written 'Zero Hour,' 'Psalms,' 'Homage to the American Indians,' and "Coplas on the Death of Merton," but it's "Trip to New York" that to me marks the turning point, the definitive fork in the road. 'Trip' and 'Soliloquy,' are the two faces of modern poetry, the angel and the devil respectively (and let us not forget the curious fact—though it may be more than that—that in 'Trip' Ernesto Cardenal mentions Nicanor Parra). This is perhaps the most lucid and terrible moment, after which the sky grows dark and the storm is unleashed.

Those who disagree can sit here and wait for Don Horacio Tregua, those who agree can follow me." (88; translation modified)

If we forgo the optional “truce”<sup>249</sup> and instead decide to scrutinize the lineage laid down by Amalfitano-Bolaño, we can better understand what he values in modern poetry and why he reaches for the paradoxical, or dialectical, concept of a double inflection point or a dual origin. Before turning to the two poems’ differences, it’s worth noting that neither represents the short lyric tradition: both are fairly long, both have unignorable narrative dimensions, and both use plain, prosaic language.

“Viaje a Nueva York,” the “angel” of the pair, is a long documentary poem rendered in long Whitmanian lines about Cardenal’s visit to a New York City convulsed by the height of the Watergate scandal. In it, the Nicaraguan revolutionary captures both signs that he is in the heart of the U.S. empire and records the many encounters he has with the representatives of various communities struggling against established power, from antiwar and anti-capitalist activists to those studying the dispossession of the American Indians. It contains both aphoristic exchanges about collective liberation and notes about what sustains him on his trip. Here is a representative sample of its playful, yet committed, omnivorousness:

Una joven: “¿Por qué la sociedad primero  
y no el corazón del hombre? Primero es lo interior!”  
Le digo: “Somos sociales. El cambio social no es *exterior*”  
El almuerzo: yogurt con fresas  
un pan negro y otro negrísimo, leche  
uvas azules, manzanas rojas, bananos amarillos  
miel, le más sabrosa que he probado en mi vida. (237; italics in the original)<sup>250</sup>

Above all, it contains a great many sketches of the friends and comrades of different generations who greet him on his trip, with constant reference to the deceased Thomas Merton. Though more earnest, it reads like a clear precursor to much of the autobiographical travel poetry that Bolaño wrote before turning his full attention to prose fiction. (“Los neochilenos” from the book *Tres* is a good example.) It is also crucial that it involves a crossing of borders, that it takes the form of a peregrination from one land to another. This internationalism may be why Amalfitano selects this Cardenal poem out of the ones that he singles out for praise.

So, what makes Parra’s “Soliloquio” demonic by comparison? As its title suggests, it is as anti-social as Cardenal’s “Viaje” is open to the social world. Instead of recording the places and names of a particular historical conjuncture and articulating the experience of coming together to try to change the world, it’s a gnomic, sardonic account of a single figure who shuns every city and crowd and who lives an abbreviated universal history, from the Stone Age to the Automobile Age and back again. (As René de Costa suggests, its tight 124 verses stand as a sardonic rebuke to Neruda’s *Canto general*.) Every time a fistful of verses in the soliloquy run

<sup>249</sup> The name “Horacio Tregua” and the bibliographical fastidiousness of this set-piece both suggest that Bolaño is in a playful, meta-literary, Borgesian mood that’s largely missing from *2666*. Compare this scene’s tone to that of Amalfitano’s conversations with Marco Antonio Guerra.

<sup>250</sup> “A young woman: ‘Why society first  
and not the heart of man? What’s interior comes first!’  
I tell her: ‘We’re social. Social change isn’t *exterior*’

Lunch: yogurt with strawberries  
a dark bread and a darker one, milk  
blue grapes, red apples, yellow bananas  
honey, the tastiest I’ve ever had.” (translation mine)

the risk of cohering into something like a parable or fable a listener might learn something from, the refrain “Yo soy el Individuo”<sup>251</sup> clangs again, and the poem veers off in another direction. Here’s the passage in which the Individual enters modernity:

Luego vinieron unas sequías,  
 Vinieron unas guerras,  
 Tipos de color entraron al valle,  
 Pero yo debía seguir adelante,  
 Debía producir.  
 Produje ciencia, verdades inmutables,  
 Produje tanagras,  
 Di a luz libros de miles de páginas,  
 Se me hinchó la cara,  
 Construí un fonógrafo,  
 La máquina de coser,  
 Empezaron a aparecer los primeros automóviles,  
 Yo soy el Individuo. (86-98)<sup>252</sup>

Untroubled by the upheavals of the world, and clearly uninterested in any kind of audience, the Individual makes art and science on a grand scale and develops the kind of puffy face that Florita Almada sees on the Santa Teresa killers in her visions. I mention that morbid concurrence because it speaks to the deep ambivalence about radical a-sociality that “Soliloquio del Individuo” shares with 2666. Parra’s naïf seems to be enjoying himself, reveling in his ingenuity, resourcefulness, and self-reliance, and celebrating not being beholden to anyone. At the same time, the soliloquy distills a casual solipsism. The Individual isn’t alone in the world—it’s still vaguely a world made by humans; his idyll is impinged on time and again by vague figures, and the last thing he does before returning to his rock is to spy on someone or something through a keyhole and from behind some curtains (113-6)—but he might as well be, given what he chooses to soliloquize about.

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<sup>251</sup> “I’m the Individual”

<sup>252</sup> “Then came the droughts,

Then came the wars,  
 Colored guys entered the valley,  
 But I had to keep going,  
 Had to produce.  
 Produced science, immutable truths,  
 Produced Tanagras,  
 Hatched up thousand-page books.  
 My face got swollen,  
 Invented a phonograph,  
 The sewing machine,  
 The first automobiles began to appear,  
 I’m the individual.  
 Someone set up planets,  
 Trees got set up!  
 But I set up hardware,  
 Furniture, stationery,  
 I’m the individual.” (*The FSG Book of Twentieth-Century Latin American Poetry*, 346)

With these sketches of the poems in mind, we can return to and assess Amalfitano's proposition that together they comprise modern Latin American poetry's foundation, its split nature, and its most "lucid and terrible" moment. I think we can generalize from that generic and geographical frame and see these poems and their contrasting ethics and poetics as foundational for the world novel that Bolaño attempted in *2666*. Cardenal's peregrinations and his openness to the ideas and struggles of others are essential to it. But so is Parra's *Individual's* "demonic" refusal to be conscripted by any institution or polity. To borrow Bakhtin's terms, the dialogic inclusiveness of the novel, as represented by Cardenal the kind, garrulous priest, is a key virtue for any literature that purports to universality. But it must be cut with the intransigent, monologic particularity of the *Individual*. In the end, *2666* spotlights very few angels or demons. Its characters are neither selfless revolutionaries nor solipsistic sociopaths. They are a great multitude of flawed strangers from distant lands who, by upholding each other in their distinctiveness, give us an experience of belonging and with it, a small measure of hope.

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