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Love and Friendship

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That friendship was crucial in Bolaño's life and is one of the main leitmotifs in his oeuvre is apparent in his last interview, which Mónica Maristain wrote for the magazine *Playboy México* in 2003. When asked about his trailblazing books, he modestly answers that, besides providing money for his family, they are useful for "making friends who are very generous and nice."¹ In this same interview, he does not hesitate to name his best friend: Mario Santiago Papasquiaro (pen name of José Alfredo Zendejas Pined, 1953–1998), the Mexican poet and cofounder of the Infrarrealista poetry movement who died in 1998 run over by a car. Known for his love of lists for everything, he adds that, at the moment, his best friends are Ignacio Echevarría (1960-), editor, one of Spain's most prominent literary critics, and sometimes mistakenly considered Bolaño's literary executor; the Argentine fiction writer Rodrigo Fresán (1963-); and A. G. Porta (1954-), who co-wrote with Bolaño the novel *Consejos de un discípulo de Morrison a un fanático de Joyce* (*Advice from a Morrison Disciple to a Joyce*, 1984; Bolaño's first published novel) and the short story "Diario de bar" (Bar Diary).

Many people, and writers in particular, saw Bolaño as a close friend as well. This was evident at his Barcelona funeral, where they bid him farewell before his ashes were dropped in the Mediterranean Sea by the town of Blanes, his place of residence for the last two decades of his life. His friends Rodrigo Fresán, Ignacio Echevarría, and Jorge Herralde, the editor and founder of the publishing house Anagrama, where Bolaño published most of his works during his life, all said kind words about the Chilean (or Latin American, since, according to his last interview, he considered himself Latin American rather than just Chilean) author. So moved was Herralde that, after describing Bolaño as a "trapeze artist without a net," explaining that he

placed “literature above anything else,” and confessing that Bolaño’s and the Spanish writer Carmen Martín Gaité’s (1925-2000) deaths had been “his two great pains as an editor,” Echevarría had to finish reading his speech. Tellingly, when Maristain asked Bolaño about his rapport with his editor, Herralde, the Chilean answered: “Quite well. Herralde is an intelligent and often charming person. Maybe it would be better form me if he weren’t so charming. The truth is that I have known him for eight years and, at least as far as I’m concerned, the affection does nothing but grow, as a bolero says. Although maybe I shouldn’t love him so much.”² In 2005, Herralde put together some of his speeches, chronicles, and interviews about his friend Bolaño in his book *Para Roberto Bolaño*.

For his part, Fresán recalled in his speech how Bolaño had recently participated in a symposium of Latin American authors in Seville, Spain, where younger writers had anointed him as a sort of “totem” for their generation. Fresán reminisced about the way in which Bolaño would repeat time and against the same joke, but using different variations, which the Argentine saw as the best kind of literary workshop. He also mentioned how Bolaño would suddenly appear by his house, looking like a dandy and a freak, to ask him questions or tell him stories (how humankind’s next evolutionary step would be artificial, rather than natural, for example).

At a conference in Incheon, South Korea, in 2013, the late Mexican writer Ignacio Padilla (1968-2016) described to me, with equal admiration for the Chilean, the same anecdote about his retelling of the same joke in different styles. I later asked him to put those impressions in writing and the outcome was his essay “Homo Bolañus: Missing Link or the Last Dodo,” which I published a year before Padilla’s passing in an edited volume. Padilla’s impression of that evening is summarized in the opening sentence, which I translated thus in the volume: “If it were possible (it is not) to establish a central date to understand Latin American literature, I would

choose June 17, 2003. And if it were indispensable—which, luckily, it is not—I would specify that it happened between midnight and one in the morning” (235). The Mexican writer conceived of this moment as the discovery of Bolaño, the last Latin American writer as well as the missing link between Borges and their admired Boom writers on the one hand, and his generation of authors in their thirties on the other:

Only then, when we found out that Roberto Bolaño had left us, did we understand the true dimension of that crucial moment, the moment when Roberto, spontaneously, tequila in hand, decided to embark on the task of telling, in all the possible literary versions, a bad joke. He would laugh, he would have fun, he varied the joke without noting the silence, without realizing that we, a collective of supposedly Latin American writers, were experiencing an epiphany: the expression of a native-born author, of a classic. (235-36)

Besides Padilla and Fresán, other then young Latin American writers present at that symposium, such as the Bolivian Edmundo Paz Soldán (1967-), the Peruvian Fernando Iwasaki (1961-), and the Mexican Jorge Volpi (1968-) have described the scene with equal wonder and have considered him a leader, which is indicative of the effect Bolaño would have on people around him.

The Catalan editor Andreu Jaume and the team of Anagrama publishing house were also present at Bolaño’s funeral, as were other writers, including the Mexican Juan Villoro (1956-), the Cuban Rolando Sánchez Mejías (1959-), and the Spaniards Javier Cercas (1962-) and Antoni García “A. G.” Porta.³ In Bolaño’s posthumous novel *Los sinsabores del verdadero policía* (*Woes of the True Policeman*, 2011), his dear friend Porta appears fictionalized as a character. Earlier, he had turned other friends into characters in his fiction, including Mario Santiago, who becomes

Ulises Lima in *Los detectives salvajes*, and Bruno Montané, who was the inspiration behind the character Felipe Müller in the same novel. Returning the favor, Bolaño has been fictionalized in his friend Javier Cercas's (1962-) novel *Soldados de Salamina* (*Soldiers of Salamis*, 2001) and Jorge Volpi (1968-) also pays homage to him in his novel *El fin de la locura* (*The End of Madness*, 2003).

Porta's note about his friend's passing, titled "Disculpen lo personal" (Sorry about How Personal This is) and published by the Spanish newspaper *El País* on 16 July 2003, opens and closes by emphasizing what a great friend Bolaño was: "A friend has died. For you all, one of the greats in literature has died, but for me one of the best friends I've ever had is gone. . . But you can believe me if I tell you that I admired him because he was a great friend of his friends."⁴ Then, in an interview in March 2013, coinciding with the launching of the Archivo Bolaño 1977-2003 (Bolaño Archive 1977-2003), Porta remembers how, when they were in their twenties in 1977, he and Bolaño would meet in the latter's apartment to talk about literature and their respective projects and, after a few hours, they would go downstairs to drink coffee and tea. Other times, they walked around, played foosball, or went to the movies. Porta also recalls that Bolaño, for whom literature was his life, could become combative when talking about other writers' literature, being often ironical or even corrosive. He speculates that the reason for this occasional cruelty was that the Chilean knew he was a better writer than most, even though he had not yet managed to publish (by the time Bolaño finally published with an important publisher, he was already forty-three years old).

Other friends of Bolaño's, such as the Chileans Jorge Morales and Bruno Montané (1957, cofounder of the Infrarrealista [Infrarealist] movement; the "realvisceralistas" in *Los detectives salvajes* [*The Savage Detectives*, 1998]), have also given speeches in his honor at different

events. Regarding his friendship with Montané, in Soledad Bianchi's anthology *Entre la lluvia y el arcoíris* (Between the Rain and the Rainbow 1983), Bolaño states: "I have learned poetry, as well, and daily camaraderie from Bruno Montané, who came to my house in Mexico in 1974, when he was 17 and I was 21, and from then on, how many adventures, recitals, loans, SOS, conversations at the bottom of the Gillette."⁵

Juan Villoro, who met Bolaño in Mexico City in 1976, opens his note "Roberto Bolaño: mito literario a su pesar" (Roberto Bolaño: Literary Myth in Spite of Himself) by describing him as an "irreplaceable friend"⁶ and by acknowledging that his friends now feel a bit ashamed of "having failed to find out what he thought about the great questions of human existence" (n.p.).⁷ Without questioning his charisma, Villoro adds, they loved him, joked and exchanged views with him, but did not see him as a historical figure or know that he would become a myth. Like many of Bolaño's friends, Villoro recalls his long phone calls:

Roberto kept the working hours of a vampire. He would wake up in the afternoon and, to get warmed up, he would call his friends . . . He might talk about an actress he liked, recount a dream, describe a military maneuver at the battle of Borodino, or just ask how my little girl was doing. Then he would hang up and start his night's work.⁸

In Mónica Maristain's 2014 *Bolaño: A Biography in Conversations*, the Chilean's friends describe him as a kind man, who was generous with younger writers, and loved phone conversations and discussing literature. In 2019, the Chilean writer Roberto Brodsky (1957-) compiled, in *Adiós a Bolaño* (Farewell to Bolaño), texts about his friend and his oeuvre read at different events, including at the 1999 Rómulo Gallegos Award, where he went invited by Bolaño. Likewise, in Brodsky's 2012 novel *Veneno* (Poison), dedicated to Bolaño's memory and

friendship, he pays homage to the latter, who is, along with Diamela Eltit (1947-), the only writer mentioned by name. In my personal correspondence with Brodsky, he kindly described Bolaño as a friend in the following terms:

I can tell you that, in matters of friendship, Bolaño was very direct and open to new encounters, new readings, new survivals and ways of conceiving of literature. And this was not because of philanthropy or literary priesthood, but because his literature was made of authors, as you already know: dead or alive, famous or sunk in anonymity, refugees in the academy or walking out in the open, Latin Americans or Spanish, Nazis or humanists. This characteristic, in addition, marked the different forms of friendship for him: in a group, personal, old, new, of total trust or of growing suspicion . . . If you were a writer, there were only two options with Bolaño: you either were his friend no matter what, or you were his enemy whenever it was your turn.⁹

“Roberto Brodsky,” one of the articles included in *Entre paréntesis* (*Between Parenthesis*, 2004), is a positive review Brodsky’s first novel, *El peor de los heroes* (*The Worst of Heroes*). In it, Bolaño calls Brodsky his friend and describes his family’s visit to his house in Blanes, and their conversations about laughter, likely and unlikely adventures, and about sadness and bravery, two constants in Brodsky’s novel.

The former infrarrealista Rubén Medina (1955-) coincides with Brodsky in his assessment of what Bolaño found more attractive in people: “Roberto became interested in people—the ones he knew, the ones he didn’t know, those he intuited—but he was even more interested in their writing, in their literary adventure.”¹⁰ In our personal correspondence, Medina described Bolaño, as a friend, as “supportive, loyal, and also a little distant,” as well as “critical,

and nothing stopped him from telling you what he thought.”¹¹ After mentioning the different friendship Bolaño kept in Mexico City with the Chilean writers Poli Délano (1936-2017) and Hernán Lavín Cerda (1939-), as well as with the Mexican poet Efraín Huerta (1914-1982), Medina states that “out of all that variety of friends, he managed to have a close, intimate, more personal friendship only with very few of them.”¹² Among the infrarrealistas, Medina lists Bruno Montané, Mara Larrosa, and Mario Santiago as Bolaño’s only close friends.

Regarding the presence of love in his private life, it was Carmen Pérez de Vega, Bolaño’s partner during his last six years, who took him to the hospital in Barcelona before his passing. One day before being interned in the hospital, Bolaño visited his editor Jorge Herralde at the office of the Anagrama publishing house to give him the manuscript of this short story collection *El gaucho insufrible* (*The Insufferable Gaucho*, 2003) and to talk about *2666* (2004), the novel that he had been frantically writing for months. Bolaño’s idea was to publish it in five separate volumes in order to leave a larger inheritance for his wife and beloved children, the thirteen-year-old Lautaro and the two-year-old Alexandra. In his testament, Bolaño left the rights of his entire oeuvre to his wife, Carolina López, and children.

Carolina López and Bolaño met in Girona in 1981 (Bolaño was twenty-eight and López, twenty) and three years later, they began to live together. They married in 1985 and moved to Blanes, where Bolaño worked at his mother’s bijouterie shop. In his last interview with Maristain, Bolaño states that it was always Carolina López, his wife, the first to read all his books and then, Herralde; this reveals his profound respect for her as a reader. For her part, in an interview with Josep Massot for the Catalan newspaper *La Vanguardia*, Carolina López describes Bolaño’s attitude toward love: “As his attitude toward games, literature, love, friendship or enmity, in reality toward life, he had a completely excessive vital attitude, which made our live together very fun but

also very complicated.”¹³ Regarding his love for his children, it can be summarized in the answer he gave in his last interview when Maristain asked him what “fatherland” meant for him: “My only homeland is my two children, Lautaro and Alexandra. And maybe, but in the background, some moments, some streets, some faces or scenes or books that are inside me and that one day I will forget, which is the best thing you can do with your homeland.”¹⁴ And when Maristain asks him what things amuse him, he answers: looking at his daughter Alexandra play.

The fact that love and friendship were central concerns in Bolaño’s life is unmistakably reflected in his oeuvre. Friendship is often a key topic, if not the main one, and at times it is the engine that moves the action in the plot. For instance, in “La parte de los críticos” (“The Part about the Critics”), the opening section in his novel *2666*, love and friendship famously intervene and interrupt the search for clues about the elusive, German author Benno Von Archimboldi, when three European critics roam around in the Northern Mexican city of Santa Teresa (supposedly Ciudad Juárez) and in the Sonora desert. Eventually, the interpersonal relationships between four academic friends—the Spanish Manuel Espinoza, the Italian Piero Morini and the French Jean Claude Pelletier male literary critics, and of the English female literary critic Liz Norton—gradually encroach into their professional research. After Norton has a romance with each of them (and a *ménage à trois* with Espinoza and Pelletier), interactions become more tense and awkward—at one point, Espinoza and Pelletier, rejected by Norton, actually become closer. Eventually, Norton begins a love relationship with Morini. As Felipe Adrián Ríos Baeza explains,

The understanding of rupture, of the uselessness of efforts, that the private will always envelop the public. This, then, is the radical politics of friendship, which almost ties in with another of Derrida’s concepts: that of hospitality . . . Without

achieving the conceptual or emotional apprehension, the critics have glimpsed a quite palpable edge of the human condition: in any type of search, there is a risk of being invaded by the other, the enemy, the hostile, the person whom one was trying so hard to hold off.¹⁵

The academic clique is disbanded after friendship turns into love and sexual attraction.

According to Ríos Baeza, their friendship, physical attraction, and love ends up “eclipsing” their academic and professional concerns about consecrating Archiboldi. In fact, the nature of their friendship becomes diffuse and contradictory as it includes in it the very notion of enemy (blackmail, repression, postponement of desire, exclusion of the other, according to Derrida).

Likewise, José Ramón Ruisánchez Serra, who claims that the heart of Bolaño’s opus is not violence or evil but the constant exploration of friendship and fraternity, has considered “La parte de los críticos” a novel about friendship:

It can be read as an adventure of the friendship between two men who want the same woman, are her lovers simultaneously, and finally lose her. Two men who despite these adventures do not stop being friends. Be it as the novel of a woman who is capable of being the lover of her friends, while still being their friend or rather, that of four critics who are friends because they admire the same writer whom they have never seen.¹⁶

Elsewhere, Ruisánchez Serra praises the fact that Bolaño was capable of elevating the novel of friendship to the time-tested level of the horror novel or the love novel:

Because what interests me when proposing the friendship novel and tensing it with the two other thematic models with older lineage is to underscore Roberto Bolaño’s enormous achievement in making the slow processes of friendship (and

not only of the friendship that begins but, above all, of the friendship that continues, the one that overcomes its impossibilities) not only narrative but also effectively thrilling.¹⁷

Friendships such as the one between Ulises Lima and Arturo Belano (Bolaño's alter ego) are also central in *Los detectives salvajes*. It is based on the real-life friendship that united the young Infrarrealistas (Mario Santiago, Bruno Montané, Rubén Medina, and others) with whom Bolaño founded a minor literary group named Infrarrealismo in 1975 in Mexico City. Villoro coincides with this assessment when he explains that "*The Savage Detectives* is a curious *Bildungsroman*, a 'sentimental education.' Like Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, it tells the story of two buddies searching for the meaning of existence on a car trip."¹⁸ Along these lines, many of Bolaño's drifting characters in *Consejos de un discípulo de Morrison a un fanático de Joyce*, *La senda de los elefantes* (*Monsieur Pain*, 1994), *La literatura nazi en América* (*Nazi Literature in the Americas*, 1996), *Estrella distante* (*Distant Star*, 1996), *Los detectives salvajes*, *Amuleto* (*Amulet*, 1999), *Nocturno de Chile* (*By Night in Chile*, 2000), *Amberes* (*Antwerp*, 2002), *El Tercer Reich* (*The Third Reich*, 2010), *Los sinsabores del verdadero policía* (*Woes of the True Policeman*, 2011), and *El espíritu de la ciencia ficción* (*The Spirit of Science Fiction*, 2016), along with several of his short stories, have long lost their hope in utopian political projects and now they only find solace in true friendships.

Regarding the topic of friendship in *La literatura nazi en América* and *Estrella distante*, Gareth Williams argues that these two novels are marked by Bolaño's apparent "inability to contemplate the political from a place other than the friend/enemy divide" (129). Bolaño, according to Williams, displaces the Left-Right political divide into paranoid friend-enemy hostilities, as Carl Schmitt's notion of the friend/enemy divide guides his understanding of

sovereignty and the political: “One of his many concerns, to which he returned on numerous occasions, was the question of enemy recognition in the relation between avant-garde poetics, history and the political. As a result, he was also concerned with the status of the friend in the historical context of state brutality against its enemies” (Williams 125). By contrast, Cory Stockwell argues that the problem is actually the narrator’s despair upon realizing his uncanny proximity to Wieder: “he would like nothing more than to declare Wieder a simple enemy, clearly distinct from him, but he knows that this is impossible” (259, n. 31). In turn, Rory O’Bryen adds that Bolaño’s play on the heteronym “adds greater depth to Bolaño’s deconstruction of the friend/enemy opposition and opens up the novel’s melancholic ending to a reflection on the failure of justice postdictatorship—the failure, among other things, to rid the future of the hostilities that organized the past and continue to haunt the present—as well as to a more progressive deconstruction of justice as that which is still, necessarily, to come, *à venir*” (28). In reality, one of the ways in which Weider is demonized in *Estrella distante* is precisely by exposing his betrayal of people who were supposed to be his friends, such as the Garmendia sisters.

The *axis mundi* in the plot of other works, such as the short novel *Amuleto* or the short story “Sensini,” included in *Llamadas telefónicas (Last Evenings on Earth, 1997)*, is also the resilient friendship among the protagonists. In *Amuleto*, the relationship between Auxilio Lacouture, the Uruguayan poet, narrator and self-appointed “mother of the new Mexican poetry” (37),¹⁹ and a host of young Latin American writers and artists, including Arturo Belano (Bolaño’s alter ego), determines the rest of the action. The same happens with the epistolary friendship between the unnamed narrator and the older Argentine writer Luis Antonio Sensini in “Sensini,” even though they stop writing letters to each other after Sensini returns to Argentina.

Thus, recognizing the importance of this friendship, Sensini's daughter, Miranda, will visit the narrator after her father's death. Overall, therefore, the significance of love and friendship in both Bolaño's life and oeuvre cannot overstated.

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Notes

¹ "Para hacer amigos que son muy generosos y simpáticos" (La última 8).

² "Bastante bien. Herralde es una persona inteligente y a menudo encantadora. Tal vez a mí me convendría más que no fuera tan encantador. Lo cierto es que ya hace ocho años que lo conozco y, al menos de mi parte, el cariño no hace más que crecer, como dice un bolero. Aunque tal vez me convendría no quererlo tanto" (La última 9).

³ Among the friends who could not attend the funeral because they were travelling, were the Spanish writer Enrique Vila-Matas (1948-), the editor of his poetry Jaume Vallcorba (1949-2014), and the editor Claudio López Lamadrid (1960-2019).

⁴ "Ha muerto un amigo. Para ustedes ha muerto uno de los grandes de la literatura, pero para mí se ha ido uno de los mejores amigos que he tenido . . . Pero pueden creerme si les digo que le admiraba porque fue un gran amigo de sus amigos" (n.p.).

⁵ "He aprendido poesía, también, y camaradería cotidiana, de Bruno Montané, quien llegó a mi casa en México, en 1974, cuando tenía 17 años y yo 21, y de allí en adelante cuántas aventuras, recitales, préstamos, S.O.S., conversaciones en el fondo de la Gillette" (n.p.).

⁶ "Amigo imprescindible" (n.p.).

⁷ "Ahora nos sentimos un poco avergonzados de carecer de información sobre lo que él pensaba sobre los grandes temas de la humanidad" (n.p.).

⁸ "Roberto tenía el horario laboral de un vampiro. Despertaba en la tarde y, para entrar en calor, llamaba a sus amigos . . . De pronto hablaba de una actriz que le gustaba, contaba un sueño, describía un movimiento militar en la batalla de Borodino o se interesaba en saber cómo estaba mi pequeña hija. Luego colgaba para adentrarse en su noche de escritura."

⁹ "Te puedo decir que en cuestiones de amistad Bolaño era muy directo y abierto a nuevos encuentros, nuevas lecturas, nuevas sobrevivencias y modos de llevar la literatura. Y esto no era por filantropía o sacerdocio literario, sino porque su literatura estaba hecha de autores, como ya sabes: vivos o muertos, célebres o hundidos en el

anonimato, refugiados en la academia o caminando a la intemperie, latinoamericanos o españoles, nazis o humanistas. Esta característica, además, marcaba las formas distintas que asumía la amistad con él: de grupo, personal, antigua, nueva, de confianza total o de sospecha creciente . . . Si eras escritor, solo había dos opciones con Bolaño: o eras su amigo para estar en todas, o eras su enemigo donde te tocara.”

¹⁰ “Roberto se interesaba en la gente —la conocida, la desconocida, la que intuía—, pero se interesaba más en su escritura, en su aventura literaria.”

¹¹ “Solidario, leal, y también un poco distante;” “Crítico, y no se detenía a decirte lo que pensaba.”

¹² “De toda esa variedad de amigos con muy pocos lograba tener una amistad cercana, íntima, más personal.”

¹³ “Como en el juego, en la literatura, en el amor, en la amistad o enemistad, en realidad ante la vida, tenía una actitud vital completamente desmesurada y esto hacía muy divertida e interesante la vida en común, también muy complicada” (n.p.).

¹⁴ “Mi única patria son mis dos hijos, Lautaro y Alexandra. Y tal vez, pero en segundo plano, algunos instantes, algunas calles, algunos rostros o escenas o libros que están dentro de mí y que algún día olvidaré, que es lo mejor que uno puede hacer con la patria” (La última 2).

¹⁵ “La comprensión de la ruptura, de la inutilidad de los esfuerzos, de que lo privado envolverá siempre lo público. Ésta es, pues, la radical política de la amistad, que casi empata con otro concepto de Derrida: el de hospitalidad . . . Sin conseguir la aprehensión conceptual ni emocional, los críticos han entrevisto una arista bastante palpable de la condición humana: en la búsqueda de cualquier clase se corre el riesgo de ser invadido por el otro, el enemigo, el hostil, al que tanto se procuraba mantener a distancia” (37).

¹⁶ “Puede ser leída como una aventura de la amistad de dos hombres que desean a la misma mujer, son amantes de manera simultánea y finalmente la pierden. Dos hombres que a pesar de estas peripecias no dejan de ser amigos. Ya sea como la novela de una mujer que es capaz de ser amante de sus amigos, sin dejar de ser su amiga. O bien de cuatro críticos que son amigos porque admiran al mismo escritor que nunca han visto” (*La Reconciliación* 16).

¹⁷ “Porque lo que me interesa al proponer la novela de amistad y tensarla con estos otros dos modelos temáticos de mayor prosapia es subrayar el enorme logro de Roberto Bolaño al volver no sólo narrativos, sino efectivamente emocionantes los lentos procesos de la amistad y no sólo de la que comienza sino, sobre todo, los de la amistad que continúa, de la que supera sus imposibilidades” (Aporías 47).

¹⁸ “‘¿Los detectives salvajes’ es una curiosa ‘bildungsroman’ o novela de educación sentimental. Como ‘En el camino’, de Jack Kerouac, narra la historia de dos compinches que peregrinan en un auto buscando el sentido de la existencia” (n.p.).

¹⁹ “Madre de la poesía joven de México” (38).