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Introduction

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Roberto Bolaño, a Less Distant Star includes several critical essays ordered not chronologically but according to literary genre and a preface by the Indian author Siddhartha Deb (1970–) titled “On Roberto Bolaño.” These essays cover many of the world-renowned Chilean author Roberto Bolaño’s (1953–2003) 20 publications, with a special emphasis on his masterpieces: *2666* (2004), *Los detectives salvajes* (*The Savage Detectives*, 1998), *Nocturno de Chile* (*By Night in Chile*, 2000), and *Estrella distante* (*Distant Star*, 1996).

The Chilean writer has attained a mythical stature in a relatively short time (since the publication in 1996 of *La literatura nazi en América* [*Nazi Literature in the Americas*]) and is often considered the most influential Latin American writer of his generation by critics such as Susan Sontag and by several fellow writers. Wilfrido H. Corral, for example, describes him as “one of the few novelists of the twentieth century who escaped their own time.”¹ In spite of the interest generated by Bolaño’s oeuvre in the United States, however, to my knowledge, this is the first English-language volume of essays on his works. There is, however, a collection of interviews and conversations published by Sybil Pérez and Marcela Valdés in 2009 with the title *Roberto Bolaño: The Last Interview and Other Conversations*. By contrast, there is one collection of essays in French, Karim Benmiloud and Raphaël Estève’s *Les astres noirs de Roberto Bolaño* (2007), and several Spanish-language volumes: Celina Manzoni’s *Roberto Bolaño, la literatura como tauromaquia* (2002), Patricia Espinosa’s *Territorios en fuga: estudios críticos sobre la obra de Roberto Bolaño* (2003), Celina Manzoni, Dunia Gras, and Roberto Brodsky’s *Jornadas homenaje Roberto Bolaño (1953–2003): simposio internacional* (2005), Fernando Moreno’s *Roberto Bolaño: una literatura infinita* (2005), Andrés Braithwaite’s *Bolaño por sí mismo. Entrevistas escogidas* (2006), and Edmundo Paz Soldán and Gustavo Faverón Patriau’s *Bolaño salvaje* (2008). In addition, several journal issues and several single-authored

studies devoted to Bolaño have been published: Jorge Herralde's *Para Roberto Bolaño* (2005), Jaime Quezada's *Bolaño antes de Bolaño: diario de una residencia en México* (2007), Chiara Bolognese's *Pistas de un naufragio: cartografía de Roberto Bolaño* (2009), Monserrat Madariaga Caro's *Bolaño infra: 1975–1977, los años que inspiraron Los detectives salvajes* (2010), Daniuska González's *La escritura bárbara: la narrativa de Roberto Bolaño* (2010), Wilfrido H. Corral's *Bolaño traducido: nueva literatura mundial* (2011), and Myrna Solotorevsky's *El espesor escritural en novelas de Roberto Bolaño* (2012). Some of his works have also been turned, or will be turned, into films and plays.

Although Bolaño is best known for his novels (he won the Herralde Award, the Rómulo Gallegos Award, and the Chilean Consejo Nacional del Libro Award for *Los detectives salvajes* in 1999 and, posthumously, the National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction for 2666 in 2008), he also wrote short stories, poems, and essays. His short stories appeared in the collections *Llamadas telefónicas* (1997) and *Putas asesinas* (2001), some of which were included in the English translations *Last Evenings on Earth* (2007) and *The Return* (2010), *El gaucho insufrible* (*The Insufferable Gaucho*, 2003), and *El secreto del mal* (*The Secret of Evil*, 2007). Before dying, Bolaño left several manuscripts ready for publication, in separate folders and with his wife's knowledge. This led to the posthumous publication of the novels *El Tercer Reich* (*The Third Reich*, 2010; it is unclear, however, whether he wanted to publish this novel) and *Los sinsabores del verdadero policía* (*Woes of the True Policeman*, 2011), as well as the aforementioned short-story collection *El secreto del mal*. Many of his essays, where one can find, among many other topics, his strong (at times irreverent) opinions on world literature, have been collected in the fascinating 2004 volume *Entre paréntesis. Ensayos, artículos y discursos (1998–2003)* (*Between Parentheses. Essays, Articles, and Speeches [1998–2003]*), edited by Ignacio Echevarría. Many other texts in the unpublished archive of 14,374 pages of this prolific writer, including, among other documents, 4 novels, 26 short stories, and poetry, are yet to be published.

Born in Santiago, Chile, in 1953, he lived in Quilpué, Cauquenes, Viña del Mar, and Los Ángeles (in the province of Bío Bío), before his family moved to Mexico City when he was 15 years old, the year of the Tlatelolco massacre. In Mexico, he worked as a journalist and became first a Trotskyist and then an anarchist. He stopped studying at age 17, before finishing high school. In 1973, Bolaño briefly returned to Chile, traveling by land, to support Salvador Allende's socialist regime,

only to end up spending eight days in prison after Augusto Pinochet's 1973 coup. He admits in an interview with Eliseo Álvarez: "When I returned to Chile, shortly before the coup, I believed in armed resistance, I believed in permanent revolution. I believed it existed then. I came back ready to fight in Chile and to continue fighting in Peru, in Bolivia" (76–77). He was lucky enough to be rescued by two former classmates who had become prison guards. Allegedly, the following year, he spent some time in El Salvador with the poet Roque Dalton and the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front; FMLN), before returning to Mexico in January of 1974. He befriended the poets Mario Santiago and Bruno Montané, with whom he founded a minor literary group named Infrarrealismo in 1975, which was antagonistic to Octavio Paz and the Mexican poetic establishment at the time. That same year, Bolaño published his first collection of poems, titled *Gorriones cogiendo altura*. He led a bohemian lifestyle during those years—the life of the poets he admired, which added to his reputation as a nonconformist, a literary enfant terrible, and a provocateur. Some of these adventures as a youth in Mexico are reflected in *Los detectives salvajes* and other works.

In 1997, Bolaño left Mexico. He traveled through Africa, France, and Spain, finally settling in Catalonia, Spain, where he got married and had different jobs during the day, often writing at night. Although he considered himself a poet (many of his poems were collected in his 1993 collection *Los perros románticos* [*The Romantic Dogs*]), he began writing fiction in Spain after the birth of his son, Lautaro, reportedly to support his family. In 1984, he published his first novel, *Consejos de un discípulo de Morrison a un fanático de Joyce* (*Advice for a Morrison Disciple from a Joyce Fanatic*), in collaboration with Antoni García Porta, for which they were awarded the Àmbitu Literario de Narrativa Prize in Barcelona. Two years later, he moved to Blanes, Girona, where he wrote his most important works. He lived in this town until liver failure led to his untimely death in Barcelona in 2003 (eleven years after finding out about his health problems), while he was still awaiting a liver transplant.

Like Julio Cortázar's 1963 novel *Rayuela* (*Hopscotch*), different types of both successful and aspiring, marginal writers and intellectuals populate Bolaño's fiction, which often deals with the role of literature in life and of literary culture/writers in society and under repressive governments. And like Borges and Cortázar, bookish references and intertextualities are common throughout his oeuvre,

including a peculiar emphasis on the trials and tribulations of being a dedicated writer, particularly an aspiring one. Some of his works are an uncensored examination of evil and its possible sources: many of his characters live in a violent Latin American world, where terror is sometimes part of daily (literary) life. Other times, both themes are related: he explores the relationship between violence/crime and literature/art. Not surprisingly, Bolaño once said on Chilean television that “crime is an art and sometimes art is a crime.” Likewise, in the chapter titled “Max Mirebalais,” included in *La literatura nazi en América*, we are told that Mirebalais, wanting to join the world of Haitian oligarchy, “soon realized that there were only two ways to achieve his aim: through violence . . . or through literature, which is a surreptitious form of violence” (127–28).² For this reason, Marcela Valdés asserts that “all of Bolaño’s mature novels scrutinize how writers react to repressive regimes” (10).

His literary world, which tends to blend autobiographical experiences with fiction, often flirts with the resources of the detective story and the thriller, even when there are no detectives per se. Some critics and writers, including Jorge Edwards, have also pointed out the similarities between Bolaño’s literary world and the picaresque genre. In addition, politics has a central role in part of his literature, as seen in the representation of fascism and Nazism in *La literatura nazi en América*, *Estrella distante*, *El Tercer Reich*, and *Nocturno de Chile*. Some of his characters have lost all hope for former utopian projects, the revolution has failed them; now they are simply trying to forget (albeit the fact that some continue to fight until the end), while they sail adrift in life, sometimes finding their only solace in fleeting relationships or in friendship. In this context, Corral points out that the voyage in Bolaño’s works “is necessary to track his characters’ internal transformation and to defy the culture of conformity through often picaresque resources.”³ The serious topics of violence, politics, and literature, however, do not prevent the author from using irony as well as humorous and lighthearted overtones that are reminiscent of the Chilean poet Nicanor Parra, one of the writers whom he admired the most, along with Jorge Luis Borges and Julio Cortázar.

Answering a question about his literature during a 1998 interview with the magazine *Ercilla*, Bolaño admits that his books are not easy because of the numerous metaliterary references: “And an ideal reader, if I may pretend to have one—even though I don’t, is the one who can navigate cultural references.”⁴ Indeed, literary and cultural references, often in relation to life, crime, and evil, abound in his pages. But the difficulty goes beyond the metaliterary, as his

fragmented “detective stories” often find no resolution to their problems. As Carlos Labbé points out,

To understand *The Savage Detectives*, it is necessary to consider the importance of its inconclusiveness, such as the fact that the narrator looks for the protagonists in places they left, interviewing characters who never saw them again. One never manages to read Cesárea Tinajero’s opus, or knows for sure what took her away from the Estridentistas and from Mexico City. It is not possible to read a single poem by Lima and Belano to systematize Visceral Realism’s aesthetic program or to find an explanation to their exile from Mexico. We will never know for sure García Madero’s whereabouts.⁵

Readers experience, therefore, a futile search for meaning and closure in some of Bolaño’s works. Their curiosity, as if they were the victims of a joke in bad taste, is not satisfied. In a way, readers experience the same sense of failure as many of Bolaño’s aspiring (and sometimes mediocre) writers. However, in works such as *Distant Star* and *By Night in Chile*, criminals are eventually caught and their crimes are uncovered.

Bolaño’s influence on new generations of writers has been summarized by Adolfo García Ortega, writer and director of the Spanish press Seix Barral, who recalls some observations made during the First Meeting of Latin American Authors in Seville, Spain: “that Borges is perhaps the most influential and prolific writer from the past century for today’s Hispanic letters, and that today, equally prolific and influential on the contemporary generation and probably in future ones is . . . Roberto Bolaño.”⁶ In García Ortega’s view, in *Los detectives salvajes* one can find the soul of the new generation of Latin American writers, “their longings, their quests, their paradoxes, their increasing number, and their long projection in time.”⁷ Without any doubt, the writers of Bolaño’s generation saw originality in his works; they felt that something new was being born, different for the Boom literature and that of their epigones: he had dared to write a new literature, with new structures, games, and concepts. Jorge Volpi actually finds in Bolaño one of the very few points in common among the Latin American writers of his generation: unlike most Latin American authors of previous generations, they all admired him (195).

Bolaño’s passing has only increased the critics and reader’s curiosity about his unpublished personal archive, owned by his widow, Carolina López, which contains 14,374 pages (230 original texts), including 26 short stories, 4 novels, numerous poems, and over 1,000 letters that he received. Although the publication of some of

these texts, perhaps without the author's consent, is a delicate issue, chances are that they will attract renewed critical attention, without necessarily changing the Chilean author's image as a writer. The new Bolañomania or the so-called Bolaño myth are ironically reminiscent of the academics and poets in his works, often obsessed with looking for a literary figure. In this context, Sarah Pollack has addressed the reception of Bolaño's works in the United States, in the context of the cultural stereotypes, preconceptions of alterity, and agendas that determine the selection of the very few Latin American novels that are translated into English every year. First, referring to the way this country translates Latin America through *The Savage Detectives*, she argues that the novel, although it shifts the inevitable association in the United States of magical realism with Latin American literature since the 1970s toward a paradigm of gritty realism, still foments US cultural consumers' prejudice about Latin American culture and politics and satisfies their collective fantasies:

Unwittingly—or perhaps with provocative deliberation—*The Savage Detectives* plays on a series of opposing characteristics that the United States has historically employed in defining itself vis-à-vis its neighbors to the south: hardworking vs. lazy, mature vs. adolescent, responsible vs. reckless, upstanding vs. delinquent. In a nutshell, Sarmiento's dichotomy, as old as Latin America itself: civilization vs. barbarism. Regarded from this standpoint, *The Savage Detectives* is a comfortable choice for U.S. readers, offering both the pleasures of the savage and the superiority of the civilized. (362)

Therefore, for Pollack, the development of the Bolaño myth goes beyond a mere marketing operation by his publishers to reach a readjustment of the image of Latin America for the US market. She also believes that his biography, including his experience during the Pinochet coup in Chile and his untimely death, made him an attractive product for the US reader; yet, she adds, Bolaño wrote his major works when he was a sober family man and an exemplary father. Then, gaining insight into the reasons this image of Latin America sells so well among US readers, she speculates that there are two complementary and appealing messages in *The Savage Detectives*:

On the one hand, their buried “adolescent” idealism is indulged as they discover in Latin America and the “Latin American” the prospect of an adventure undertaken in the earnest belief of the saving power and transcendental meaning of action and poetry . . . Thanks to Bolaño, U.S. readers can vicariously relive the best of the seventies, fascinated

with the notion of a Latin America still latent with such possibilities. On the other hand, Bolaño's novel may be read as a cautionary moral tale that demonstrates the consequences of taking such rebellions too seriously and too far. (361)

From a different perspective, some readers try to find in both Bolaño's fiction and nonfiction who he really was, wondering, for example, whether he really was a heroin addict, as the first-person narrator claims in "Playa" ("Beach," 2004), a seemingly autobiographical essay first published in the Spanish newspaper *El Mundo* and then included in *Entre paréntesis*. This claim, incidentally, has been refuted by his relatives and friends. In any case, whether it is relevant or not, many of his readers have tried to find the limit that separates Roberto Bolaño from his literary alter ego, Arturo Belano. By the same token, although some people who knew the Chilean author have questioned whether he really spent eight days in a Chilean prison after Pinochet's coup or met the assassins of Salvadoran poet Roque Dalton in 1974, these episodes have added to Bolaño's mythical aura as a radical rebel, particularly in the United States. And it would not be too far-fetched to think that they probably added respectability and gravitas to his short novels *Nocturno de Chile* and *Estrella distante*, which, for the most part, take place in Chile during Pinochet's dictatorship. In any case, as Juan E. De Castro points out, Bolaño does not approach these historic events as the traditional engaged writer:

Bolaño has provided other writers with an example of how to write about politics in a post-political manner. Throughout his novels Bolaño replaces political commitment with ethical evaluation. If the image of the Latin American writer as necessarily radical was a caricature drawn up by both conservatives and leftists during the 1960s... most contemporary novelists judge politics from a position akin to that of Bolaño: ethical and beyond any identifiable political current or position. (Varn n.p.)

The legend only grew with the image of an author allegedly writing against the clock to finish *2666*, even in detriment of his own health. In a way, Bolaño managed to turn his life into a work of art, as his admired Rimbaud did before him. His writings themselves opened a door to these types of speculations, whenever he reflected on his own phobias, obsessions, or even his fear of mortality, as he seemingly does in "Playa": "and even the old woman was gazing at me... maybe wondering who that young man was, that man with silent tears running down his face, a man of thirty-five who had nothing at all but who

was recovering his will and his courage and who knew that he would live a while longer” (“Beach” 264).⁸ But the true connections between reality and fiction in his literature remain blurred (Corral talks about the “autobiographical traps”⁹ of which Bolaño was so fond). After all, as we learn in *La literatura nazi en América*, “All poets invent their past”¹⁰ (130). The relevance of these tenuous autobiographical experiences to the understanding of Bolaño’s work remains unclear, just like the question about which of his posthumous works were unintentionally left unfinished.

There is no doubt that the myth about his obsessive writing against the clock of death, his aura as a young *poète maudit* living in Mexico, his well-known economic difficulties in Spain, and particularly his untimely death have contributed to engaging the curiosity of readers. Be that as it may, new publications or biographical findings will probably not change his status as the most influential writer of his generation. Edmundo Paz Soldán shares this view on Bolaño when he talks about “the legend of someone who was at the same time our contemporary and our teacher.”¹¹ Born in Chile, Bolaño considered himself first and foremost a Latin American. In spite of his cosmopolitan, postnational, or extraterritorial (Echevarría, “Bolaño internacional” 188) outlook pointed out by several critics, he was, according to Jorge Volpi (191), the last Latin American writer. And he could certainly claim to be one, having lived in Chile and Mexico, even though most of his published narratives were written in Spain. This is reflected in the easiness with which his characters speak with dialects and slang from Mexico, Chile, or Spain, a nuance that is regrettably lost in the English translations of his works.

Bolaño is also well known for having rejected magical realism and especially the writing of post-Boom authors who imitated García Márquez’s techniques, thus sharing his views with the McOndo group (Alberto Fuguet, Sergio Gómez, Edmundo Paz Soldán, and Jaime Bayly) as well as the Crack group (Jorge Volpi, Pedro Ángel Palou, Ricardo Chávez Castañeda, Eloy Urroz, and Ignacio Padilla): “we’re reasonable human beings (poor, but reasonable), not spirits out of a manual of magic realism, not postcards for foreign consumption and abject masquerade. In other words, we’re beings who have the historic chance of opting for freedom, and also—paradoxically—life” (Bolaño, “The Lost” 106).¹² In both interviews and essays, he certainly spared no praise for authors he admired (Borges, Cortázar, Nicanor Parra, Javier Marías, Enrique Vila-Matas, César Aira, Juan Villoro, and Rodrigo Rey Rosa, among numerous others) or criticism for the many authors he disliked and sometimes for even his own

works (e.g., he claimed to have destroyed all his dramas). In other texts, he is mercilessly critical of Latin American literature in general: “We have the worst politicians in the world, the worst capitalists in the world, the worst writers in the world . . . We do our best to fool a few naive Europeans with terrible books, in which we appeal to their good nature, to political correctness, to tales of the noble savage, to exoticism” (“The Lost” 105).¹³ As a result of these firm convictions on literary issues, he gained enemies, particularly in his own country. But perhaps what is more impressive, besides the depth and brilliance of his reading of works by Borges and others, is the breadth of his readings of international literature, apparent in his essays included in *Entre paréntesis*.

Moving on to the essays included in this collection, after the foreword by Siddhartha Deb, the reader will find two general overviews of Bolaño’s oeuvre. The first one, by Rory O’Byrne, demonstrates how, explicitly aligning himself “with the ghost of Pierre Menard” in *Distant Star*, Bolaño returns to the scene of avant-garde Chilean writing and politicizes Borges’s reflections in new ways. With its doublings, mirrors, twins, and alter egos, *Distant Star*’s deconstruction of the proper name—and with that, of attendant notions of responsibility—signals the impossibility of justice in the transition to democracy postcoup. Yet, according to O’Byrne, by explicitly aligning himself with the ghost of Menard, who rewrites a past text by rereading it in the light of its possible future resignifications, Bolaño also demands a positive rethinking of justice and restitution as that which is forever unfinished and anachronistic. In the second overview, my essay studies the reflection, in Bolaño’s works, of his psychological evolution from a devotion to political activism to melancholic skepticism and disappointment. In addition, I analyze the narrative role of repetition as an implementation of Borges’s theories as presented in his short story “Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote” (“Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote”).

The chapters that follow focus on Bolaño’s two major novels: *The Savage Detectives* and *2666*. In the first of the four essays, Margaret Boe Birns looks at the way the title *2666* contains the “number of the beast,” 666, with the number two suggesting the coincidence of two visits by this ancient symbol of evil: the first deployment of 666 is in the narrative concerned with Nazi Germany and the figure of Reiter; the second one takes place in Mexico during the 1990s, reflecting the rise of neoliberal global capitalism, in which Reiter morphs into the elusive figure of Archimboldi. Then, Raúl Rodríguez Freire proposes a different way to approach Bolaño’s works, away from the tendency to

overemphasize the issues of agency and subject positions: he explores the influence of epic works and themes. In turn, Martín Camps examines the “horrorism” of the apocalyptic *2666*, but this time in the context of *postnorteño* (postnorthern) novels and the femicides in Ciudad Juárez, considered as the preamble to many murders and disappearances by drug trafficking groups in this city.

The following two essays look at Bolaño’s short novels and short stories. Nicholas Birns’s essay examines Bolaño’s works in light of his personal politics, the era of neoliberalism, and the misreading of his novels in the English-speaking world. It also analyzes his representation of the political Right: the Pinochet coup in *By Night in Chile* and *Distant Star*, where literature is not seen as inherently opposed to or incorruptible by Right-wing politics, and Nazi Germany in *Nazi Literature in the Americas* and *The Third Reich*, where the author shows how thoroughly fascist ideas did in fact permeate the Latin American imaginary and how fiction, as a mode of game, is complicit in what it represents. In the second essay of this section, Brett Levinson analyzes the theme of literature in the works of Roberto Bolaño and, above all, in *The Insufferable Gaucho*. Focusing first on the relationship between Bolaño and Kafka, it strives to demonstrate how Bolaño’s penchant for excessive violence represents the author’s effort to recover the connection between literature and subversion, and to deploy this bond as a means to rethink the role of art within Latin American neoliberalism.

Two more essays complete the volume with the analysis of Bolaño’s poetry. Luis Bagué Quílez’s study shows how intertextuality, irony, and metafiction are constant issues in Bolaño’s work. It deals with the relationship between the novels *La literatura nazi en América* and *Estrella distante*, and the event where Raúl Zurita’s poem “La nueva vida” (The new life) flew over the skyline of New York thanks to the smoke produced by five aircrafts, a tribute to New York’s Latino immigrant community and a response to the aesthetics of disappearance. The inverted parallel between Bolaño’s and Zurita’s texts, halfway between complicity and parody, opens a controversial discourse space involving tradition, challenging the authorial models represented by both writers, and examining the way in which two Chilean authors show the memory of disappearance. In turn, Enrique Salas-Durazo argues that although often considered a mere part of Bolaño’s “pre-history,” in *Amberes* (*Antwerp*, 2002), published both as novel and poetry, several of Bolaño’s themes, images, and ideas about writing exploded, forming the universe of his literary legacy. In this work, one can track clues for interpreting the intricate web of relationships

between his early poetic intuition and the development of his prose style. With this collection of essays, we hope to contribute to the understanding of Bolaño's works in the English-speaking world and to encourage new studies on his oeuvre.

Notes

1. "uno de los pocos novelistas latinoamericanos del siglo veinte que se han escapado de su propio tiempo" (26).
2. "Pronto comprendió que sólo existían dos maneras de acceder a él: mediante la violencia abierta... o mediante la literatura, que es una forma de violencia soterrada" (62).
3. "es necesario para rastrear las transformaciones internas de los personajes y desafiar la cultura de la conformidad mediante recursos frecuentemente picarescos" (47–48).
4. "Y un lector ideal, si es que puedo pretender tenerlo—aunque no lo hago—, es el que maneja referencias culturales" (76).
5. "Para entender *Los detectives salvajes* es necesario considerar la importancia de sus inconclusiones, tal como el narrador busca a los protagonistas en los sitios donde se han ausentado, entrevistando a personajes que no volvieron a verlos. Nunca se logrará leer la obra de Cesárea Tinajero, menos conocer a cabalidad qué le llevó lejos de los Estridentistas y de la capital mexicana. No es posible leer un solo poema de Lima y Belano, sistematizar el programa estético del realismo visceral, ni tampoco encontrar la explicación del exilio de ambos de México. Jamás sabremos, con certeza, el paradero de García Madero" (94–95).
6. "que Borges es tal vez el escritor más influyente y fecundo del siglo pasado para las letras hispanas de hoy en día, y que el escritor de hoy en día igualmente influyente y fecundo, en la actual generación y seguramente en otras venideras es... Roberto Bolaño."
7. "sus ansias, sus búsquedas, sus paradojas, su número tan creciente, y su larga proyección en el tiempo" (n.p.).
8. "y hasta la vieja me observaba...preguntándose tal vez quién era aquel joven que lloraba en silencio, un joven de treinta y cinco años que no tenía nada, pero que estaba recobrando la voluntad y el valor y que sabía que aún iba a vivir un tiempo más" ("Playa" 245).
9. "trampas autobiográficas" (269).
10. "Todos los poetas... inventan su pasado" (63).
11. "La leyenda de alguien que fue a la vez nuestro contemporáneo y maestro" (n.p.).
12. "somos seres humanos razonables (pobres, pero razonables), no entelequias salidas de un manual de realismo mágico, no postales para consumo externo y abyecto disfraz interno. Es decir: somos seres que pueden optar en un momento histórico por la libertad y también, aunque resulte paradójico, por la vida" ("Los perdidos" 97–98).

13. “Tenemos los peores políticos del mundo, los peores capitalistas del mundo, los peores escritores del mundo... Tratamos de engañar a algunos europeos cándidos e ignorantes con obras pésimas, en donde apelamos a su buena voluntad, a lo políticamente correcto, a las historias del buen salvaje, al exotismo” (“Los perdidos” 96–97).

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Part I

General Overview



Chapter 1

Writing with the Ghost of Pierre Menard: Authorship, Responsibility, and Justice in Roberto Bolaño's *Distant Star*

Rory O'Bryen

In the short preface to *Distant Star* (1996), Roberto Bolaño frames his novel as a revised version of the story of Lieutenant Ramírez Hoffman told at the end of his fictional encyclopedia, *Nazi Literature in the Americas* (1996). Citing the dissatisfaction of “a fellow Chilean, Arturo B., a veteran of Latin America’s doomed revolutions” (1)¹—Bolaño’s fictional source and alter ego—he promises an expansion of the “grotesque” story of that infamous poet turned pilot and serial killer around the time of the coup of 1973. The result, he adds, “rather than mirroring or exploding” former versions, would be “in itself a mirror and an explosion” (1). The terms used to frame this supplementary exercise immediately place us on Borgesian grounds, recalling Jorge Luis Borges’s collaborative “discovery” (also thanks to “a mirror and an encyclopaedia”) of the grotesque universe of “Tlön” (“Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” in *Ficciones* 13).² “Tlön” offers a fantastical image of the universe as seen through the normative principles of Enlightenment rationality. It also represents the monstrous distortion of those principles under the conditions of fascism. That Bolaño should evoke Borges in a postdictatorship context signals an effort to develop Borges’s reflections for an understanding of the Chilean present. Bolaño’s claim, immediately after these Borgesian *clins d’oeil*, that he wrote *Distant Star* in dialogue with “the increasingly animated ghost of Pierre Menard” (1), makes these aims more explicit, and links this task to a renewal of Menard’s legacy as set out in “Pierre Menard, Author of Don Quixote.”

One commonly held view of Bolaño’s writing is that it offers an inventive reanimation of the aesthetic forms and thematic

preoccupations of his Argentine precursor.³ This is partly confirmed by formal similarities between works such as *Nazi Literature in the Americas*—Bolaño's pseudoencyclopedic summation of an array of fictional proto-Nazi, Nazi, and neo-Nazi authors writing between 1894 and 2030—and *A Universal History of Iniquity* (2001), Borges's satirical retelling of the lives of various deviants, villains, and misfits from the world literary canon. As Celina Manzoni notes in *Roberto Bolaño: la escritura como tauromaquia* (17–32), both works share a fascination with evil, and with this, an effort to restore such evil to Enlightenment discourses of “Universal History” that construe history, as Hegel does, in terms of the emancipatory, truth-disclosing dialectic of rational consciousness. Bolaño's political resignification of Borges's timid *exercices de style*, one should add, lies in its substitution of the Borgesian appeal to the consequently substituted universals of irrationality and evil with their historical presentation in the particular guise of Nazism. This substitution establishes a dialectical interplay between the peripheral rewriting of (universal) history as a history of iniquity—an instance of Borges's irreverent “*réécriture dans la déviance*” (rewriting in deviance [Lafon in Boldy, *Companion to Borges* 28])—and its universalizing counterpart in Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), according to which the dialectic of universal history culminates with its return to myth and barbarism. *Nazi Literature of the Americas* significantly postpones the dialectical synthesis of these stories to a moment that lurks ominously as a not too distant possibility but one that remains postponed, deferred, yet to come. Additionally, Manzoni's observation that *Nazi Literature* is more (*Latin*) *American* in its focus than *A Universal History* (*Tauromaquia* 24), should prompt us, in our effort to grasp Bolaño's political motivations for reanimating Menard's specter, to turn to the immediate context in which he wrote, and particularly to the specifically Chilean context in which literature has become indelibly marked by the horrors of dictatorship and the neoliberal orders that it imposed. Attention to Borges's “Pierre Menard, Author of Don Quixote” and to its critical reception, as well as bringing the story's literary aims into focus, will allow us to arrive at a genealogical understanding of Bolaño's alignment with Menard's ghost, and with this, more crucially, at an understanding of what is political about his radicalization of the Borgesian story's deconstruction of authorship in particular.

The principal effect of Borges's story is a defamiliarization of the activities of reading such that reading is reframed as a kind of writing, and writing as a kind of reading. He achieves this by contrasting

the “visible” oeuvre of a minor French symbolist Pierre Menard—one comprising 20 or so publications on topics as varied as Leibnitz, Ramón Llul, Valéry, translation and the Achilles and the Tortoise parable—with its “invisible” counterpart in Menard’s word-for-word “rewriting” of Chapters 9, 38, and 22 of Cervantes’s *Don Quixote*. The latter radically enriches the meaning of the seventeenth-century classic. As the outcome of a reading that leaves no discernible trace on the text, Menard’s work is more “subterranean, [and] interminably heroic” than its “visible” counterpart (*Ficciones* 51). Borges thus equates the singular act of reading with an animation of the plurality of virtual interpretations lying unactualized within any text and with the power to lay bare the excess of virtual interpretations over the present moment of any concrete enunciation. His qualification that such an “oeuvre” is perhaps “the most significant [work] of our time” (51) also underscores reading’s capacity to put time itself “out of joint”⁴: its power to shed light on the contingency of the present and its radical openness to future reinterpretations. Bolaño’s “Menardian” deconstruction of notions of *criminal* authorship in *Distant Star*, as I shall show, points to a similar such contingency in efforts to bring *criminals* to justice.

Exemplifying the process by which reading opens a text to future resignifications, Borges writes that in Chapter 38 of the Spanish classic, *Don Quixote*’s discussion of the superiority of arms over letters predictably expresses the view of an author who had once been a soldier. Coming from a contemporary of pacifists such as Bertrand Russell and Julien Benda—whose *La Traïson des Clers* (1927) had denounced intellectual involvement in political and military affairs—Menard’s articulation of the same view has a decidedly anachronistic effect that militates against his stated intellectualism. “Menard,” Borges surmises, had “enriched the slow and rudimentary act of reading by means of a new technique—the technique of deliberate anachronism and fallacious attribution” (*Ficciones* 59). Rather than lament the loss of original meaning generated by such a reading, Borges exhorts us, with characteristic wit, to embrace the differences to which it gives rise: “to read the *Odyssey* as if it came after the *Aeneid*, to read Mme Henri Bachelier’s *Le jardin du Centaure* as though it were written by Mme Henri Bachelier,” even to entertain the possibility that the *Imitatio Christi* might be the work of Céline or James Joyce (59). To adopt this attitude toward reading is to set in motion a text’s “subterranean” potential, to underscore the contingency of all fixed identities and the semantic inexhaustibility of the present. This emphasis on the inexhaustibility both of individual texts and of the

present is key to Bolaño's appeal to Menard's ghost, which demands that we approach notions of historical closure with skepticism.

Criticism of stories like "Pierre Menard" long framed Borges as a "universal writer," particularly after their translation into French by Roger Caillois in the 1950s, their subsequent anthologization in English editions, and their adoption as precursors of poststructuralist trends in literary criticism. In some cases, these readings reify Borges as a poet of "irreality" or inadvertent champion of today's discourse on the "end of history" (Balderston, *Out of Context*), disregarding the specific context in which his stories obtain meaning such that they appear "without precedent or provenance" (Boldy, *Companion to Borges* 3).⁵ In other cases, in ways analogous to Menard's own anachronistic readings, they underscore the stories' potential to signify in contexts with which their author could not have been acquainted. Bolaño's conjuration of Menard's specter illuminates both the specific Chilean context from which his work emerges and the transformation of that context by global processes. Indeed, Bolaño's stated dialogue with Menard's ghost shapes his reflection on a range of issues, including the reconfiguration of the relationship between politics and aesthetics after the Chilean military dictatorship of 1973, the incompleteness of the redemocratization process that began in 1990, and the transformation of Chilean life by those neoliberal policies imposed by dictatorship and enshrined by the conspicuously partial transition to democracy.⁶

More recently, criticism has reinforced this political potential in Borges's oeuvre, illuminating the changing relationship between politics and aesthetics in contexts such as Bolaño's own. In the light of Borges's essay "The Argentine Writer and Tradition" (1951), which eschewed the search for "local color" in favor of an irreverent *criollo* assumption of the right to engage with all Western culture (Borges, *Discusión*),⁷ Beatriz Sarlo, for example, reads Menard's construction of meaning in the "frontier space where reading and interpretation confront the text" as a symptom of the conflicted construction of "frontier cultures" such as that of the River-Plate region (*Borges: Writer on the Edge* 32–33). Alan Pauls's *El factor Borges*, in a similar vein, takes Menard's "parasitical" reading of the Spanish classic as an instance of what Deleuze and Guattari would later call "minor writing" in reference to writing that "deterritorializes" a major work or language by making it foreign to itself.⁸ Tales such as "Pierre Menard" thus reframe "world literature" via a mode of symbolic production that is locally derived, pitting seemingly universal aesthetic and philosophical currents against one another in a manner reminiscent of

the duels between *gauchos* and *compadritos* in Borges's early texts. Ricardo Piglia's observation that Borges strives endlessly to reconcile the conflicting legacies of his split Anglo-Argentine ancestry—his interest in the military battles of the Independence, gleaned from his mother's family, and his love of English literature and philosophy, the legacy of his father—partly explains Menard's blurring of the conflict between "arms" and "letters" in *Don Quixote* (Piglia, "Ideología y ficción en Borges"). What Pauls adds is that the result of this constant labor is a work that turns "literature into a battlefield, books into weapons, and words into blows" (*El factor* 73). Finally, in a painstaking pursuit of Borges's historical references that unearths the "political unconscious" that strains to be heard therein,⁹ Daniel Balderston reads "Pierre Menard" as providing one instance of a political conflict that plays out across the entirety of the Argentine's oeuvre, namely, a conflict between the pacifism of Russell and Benda (voiced in his repudiations of Peronism, fascism, and Communism) and a Sorelian appeal to violence (this time as poetic principle) expressed in his fixation on the founding battles of Argentine history (*Out of Context* 18–38).

As well as foregrounding the interdependence of arms and letters in Borges, along with their interpenetration and mutual contamination throughout the bloody course of the twentieth century, the aforementioned readings underscore the centrality of conflict in many Latin American authors' efforts to impose their signature on the critical recycling of discourses and ideologies seen to constitute the singularity of the region's literature. As an alternative to discourses on the region's cultural identity that take as their master-signifiers notions of "hybridity,"¹⁰ or the process of "transculturation" by which peripheral cultures refashion themselves in the language of the "centre" or metropolis,¹¹ the mutation of scenes of reading and writing into "battlefields" restores visibility to an interplay of forces and to the ubiquity of a kind of *polemos* (struggle or combat) at the heart of much twentieth-century Latin American writing. Such conflict is no longer restricted to the reworking of foundational oppositions between "civilization and barbarism" central to the primitivist turn in the first half of the century. Neither is it confined to the constellation of antagonisms that animated much literature of the Boom—antagonisms, for example, between nationalism and cosmopolitanism or art for art's sake and socially committed writing. Instead it concerns the struggle to reimagine a role for literature, and as a site of critical negativity, once the Cold War battle between the "conflicting universals" of Communism and capitalism (Franco's terms, *Decline and Fall* 21–56)

seems to have been irreversibly resolved in favor of capitalism, and with that, of the commodification of all areas of cultural life.

Today the late capitalist culture industry has displaced literature, as Adorno and Horkheimer had predicted, as the hegemonic mode of cultural expression, allowing a new class of economists and technocrats to depose the Latin American *letrado* as public moralist and arbiter of national social and political processes (Rama, *La ciudad letrada*). In the countries of the Southern Cone in particular, these transformations were precipitated by the extrajudicial violence carried out under the dictatorships, which, under the guiding rubric of a war on Communism, would “not only destroy civil society but also facilitate the transition from welfare states to the porous neoliberal state” (Franco, *Decline and Fall* 12). Within the same context, the project of fashioning a Latin American discourse out of the peripheral reclamation and resignification of an “archive” of Western discourses had to be radically rethought.¹² For authors like Carlos Fuentes, such a project had allowed the “Boom” writer to champion aesthetic cosmopolitanism as a way out of the primitive concerns of early-twentieth-century regionalism.¹³ More recently, writers have questioned this view, showing how “Boom” writers like Fuentes, Cortázar, and Vargas Llosa, in claiming that their aesthetic modernism had resolved “the painful distinction between centre and periphery”—making Latin Americans, in Fuentes’s view, “contemporaries with the rest of the world” (in Avelar, *The Untimely Present* 26)—had unwittingly provided a rationale for the imposition of neoliberal policies in nations where modernity was a conspicuously unfinished project (22–38).

The contemporary significance of Bolaño’s work thus lies, as Jean Franco succinctly puts it, in his effort “to redirect the whole literary enterprise . . . in a moonscape of political and social disaster” (“Questions for Bolaño” 207). This effort leads him to reflect on the dictatorship’s ability to confound the Boom’s earlier assumption of the aesthetic’s clean opposition to commodification. Indeed, as Franco remarks in her earlier work, “in the market-driven neoliberal states of the 1990s, the intelligentsia . . . could no longer assume a position as sharpshooter from the outside” (*Decline and Fall* 13). The collapse of this illusion of exteriority casts a shadow over Bolaño’s work, generating a painful process of self-examination that leads to a relentless unearthing of conscious and unconscious forms of complicity with authoritarian rule by writers and intellectuals who might claim to have acted otherwise.¹⁴ Bolaño’s conjuring forth of the specter of Pierre Menard is central to completing such a task for, as Borges

had shown, Pierre Menard's principal contribution to literature is his ability to show how texts signify outside the immediate context of their production in ways that contradict their stated intentions. Yet as Fabián Soberón notes in an article that significantly informs my reading here, Bolaño's rereading of Borges, like Menard's rereading of Cervantes, also "fragments Borges's oeuvre in order to reorient its concerns" ("Pierre Menard, autor de Bolaño" 1). Nowhere is this clearer than in *Distant Star*, where Bolaño's explicit alignment "with the increasingly animated ghost of Pierre Menard" (1) is crucial to his reconstruction of the story of Chilean avant-garde writing before, during, and after Pinochet's coup of 1973. Such collaboration allows him to rethink not only the notions of authorship central to the adjudication of responsibility in the process of democratization, but also the possibility of justice when that authorship is rendered plural by the recognition of all writing's semantic openness to the future.

Distant Star begins with an unnamed narrator with close ties to Arturo Belano recalling his involvement in the poetry workshops of Juan Stein and Diego Soto in the early 1970s. Also a member of these workshops was a mysteriously reserved figure who went by the aristocratic name of Alberto Ruiz-Tagle. Unlike the narrator and his friends—who believe that "revolution and armed struggle would usher in a . . . new era" (3) and who speak "a sort of slang or jargon derived in equal parts from Marx and Mandrake the Magician" (6)—Ruiz-Tagle is not a socialist (15) and speaks Spanish tout court (6). His poems are written in a cold, minimalist style whose closest parallel is the haiku; but there are rumors that he is going to "revolutionize Chilean poetry" (14). After the coup, members of both workshops disappear and the narrator spends a short spell in prison. During this time, he witnesses a number of "performances" in which Ruiz-Tagle, who now signs his works Carlos Wieder, takes to the sky in a Messerschmitt to compose "poems" in letters of smoke. In the first, he transcribes the opening lines of Genesis: IN PRINCIPIO . . . CREAUIT DEUS . . . COELUM ET TERRAM. In the second, he writes the command "Learn!" Various private clients then hire him to continue these performances. He writes poems championing Chile's sovereignty over the Antarctic and about the birth of a "new age of iron for the Chilean race" (43). Finally, he hosts a private exhibition in which members of the junta and of Chilean high society are shown images of scores of women that he has butchered, including the two stars of Soto and Stein's workshops: the Garmendia twins Verónica and Angélica. The exhibition causes a stir, Wieder becomes an embarrassment to the regime, and he is advised to leave the country.

As this summary intimates, one of the first effects of Bolaño's text is to turn any assumption of culture's opposition to violence on its head. Pursuing this line of argument, Ignacio López-Vicuña reads Ruiz-Tagle's metamorphosis into Carlos Wieder and the genesis of the former's "lettriste" poems into the latter's spectacular acts of violence as examples of Walter Benjamin's thesis that "there is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism" ("The Violence of Writing" 248). *Modernistas* like Rubén Darío had held an unshakeable faith in the humanizing power of literature. Ruiz-Tagle's metamorphosis into Wieder unsettles this faith, reframing literature not "as a form of (humanistic) *resistance* against violence" but as "violence's intimate reverse" (156; emphasis in original). In fact, in a recodification of the humanist values often attached to literature, Wieder—later writing under the heteronym Jules Defoe and as a member of an association of "barbaric writers"—champions "defecating on the pages of Stendhal . . . and spattering blood over the pages of Balzac or Maupassant" as a means to art's ritual "humanisation" (*Distant* 131). Wieder's name suggests that this "humanization" consists of a return to literature of all that has been historically repressed by humanist ideology: among other things perversity, evil, and the lower body and its effluences. Hence, in a parody of the kind of "bellettristic" approach to literature that the text otherwise eschews, the narrator's friend Bibiano O'Ryan indulges in a complex etymological investigation into Wieder's name that identifies Wieder with this "return of the repressed." "Weider," he tells us, gathers meanings denoting repetition—"once more,' 'again,' 'a second time,' and in some contexts 'over and over' or 'the next time,' in sentences referring to future events" (40). It also denotes oppositionality or negation, as exemplified by cognate terms such as "*Widerchrist*, 'the Antichrist;' *Widerhaken*, 'barb, hook;' *widerraten*, 'to dissuade;' *Widerlegung*, 'refutation, rebuttal'" (41). These two clusters of meaning then come together in derivatives such as "*Widernatürlichkeit*, 'monstrosity, aberration,'" and in the term "*weiden* [meaning] to take morbid pleasure in the contemplation of an object that excites sexual pleasure and/or sadistic tendencies" (41, italics in the original). Wieder's "barbaric" acts, connoted in this way with "returns of the repressed" of various sorts, signal in an extension of Pierre Menard's demonstration of a text's meaning's radical open-endedness (as well as its ability to mean precisely the opposite of what it was first intended to mean) that most literature, no matter how humanistic its intentions, can become an instrument of war when it ends up in the wrong hands.

Second, and in the light of this demonstration of literature's constitutive indeterminacy, *Distant Star* demands that we rethink, from the point of view of dictatorship, the story of modernism's relation to the avant-garde. For Peter Bürger (1984), the avant-garde had developed the concerns of early European modernism by turning the latter's autonomous aesthetic innovations into a praxis aimed at reorganizing everyday life. For Bürger, as for Benjamin and later Adorno, the political thrust of this desired transformation was notoriously neutralized by art's institutionalization and by the rise of the culture industry. In the context of dictatorship, Wieder's sublime rupture with the idiom of modernist aesthetics does not confront any neutralization as such. Rather, provided with the backing of the military it generates a materialization of the "violence" that underpins its gesture of rupture with bourgeois art. Citing the work of feminist critic Frances Ferguson, Philip Shaw notes that aesthetic treatises tend to imagine the gesture of sublime rupture as a "ravishing" or "rape" of the conventional beauty (which is historically gendered feminine).¹⁵ By taking poetry out of the workshop and into the skies over Chile, and then from the open skies back into the realm of the private photography exhibition, Wieder turns this latent motif of sublime "violation" into the basis of an avant-garde intervention into life that is directly inscribed on the female body. What starts with abstract, ethereal poetry ends in ritualized femicide.¹⁶

Third, and more specifically, Bolaño's resuscitation of the ghost of Pierre Menard takes aim at the semantic instability of the performances of the Chilean neoavant-garde or *avanzada* led by the Colectivo Acciones de Arte (CADA) during the years of the dictatorship. In *The Insubordination of Signs* (2004), the Franco-Chilean critic Nelly Richard notes that CADA sought to create a "refractory art" that would be "unassimilable by any 'official' cultural system," just as Walter Benjamin had sought "to forge concepts which... [would be] completely useless for the purposes of fascism" (4). Its members (among them, the novelist Diamela Eltit, the poet Raúl Zurita, and the visual artists Lotty Rosenfeld and Juan Castillo) proposed artistic interventions "that a totalitarian logic would find impossible to take advantage of or appropriate, in the economy, [or] in circulation within that system, not even as an explicit sign of dissidence" (4). "Happenings" such as "Oh South America" (1981), in which four hundred thousand fliers were dropped over Santiago declaiming "the work of improving the accepted standard of living is the only valid project for art" (26), thereby sought to dismantle the painting as art-work and to question the institutional frameworks in which art was

validated. Similarly, literary works such as Eltit's *Por la patria* (*For the Fatherland*, 1986) "filled [their] narration with contradictory and mutually conflicting subaccounts to raise suspicion regarding the central story's monologue" (13). As Richard puts it, "To have formulated meanings that were merely *contrary* to the dominant point of view, without taking aim at the larger order of its signifying structures, would have meant remaining inscribed within the same linear duality of a Manichean structuring of meaning" that structured dictatorship (4, emphasis in original).

Bolaño's oeuvre is founded on a desire to transcend the same conventional orders of meaning underpinning dictatorship. In *Distant Star*, however, the *avanzada's* effort to dismantle "the Manichean notion of art's alterity to life" (Richard, *Insubordination* 27) is shown to be nothing short of an historical tautology. Through Wieder's aerial performances over Concepción, Bolaño restages CADA's work—Raúl Zurita's poetic performances in particular—in a more ambivalent light. In so doing, like the French symbolist rereading the Spanish classic three hundred years after its composition, he reminds us how a work's meaning remains forever indeterminate. In "The New Life" of June 1982, Zurita had composed a five-mile-long poem over the skies over Manhattan that read: "My God is Cancer / My God is Emptiness / My God is Wound / My God is Ghetto / My God is Pain." In Gareth Williams's words, Zurita's poem "socialized God by equating him...with socio-economic marginalization and the suffering and pain of the human body" ("Sovereignty and Melancholic Paralysis" 134). Wieder's poem, "Death is Chile / Death is Responsibility / Death is Love / Death is growth / Death is communion / Death is cleansing" (*Distant* 80–82), turns that suffering into the basis of a fascist cult of death in which death appears necessary for the "purification" of the body politic. These Menardian rewritings challenge Richard's (and CADA's) claims regarding the possibility of an "unassimilable" form of writing. In *Distant Star*, Wieder's endorsement by the regime, along with his later patronage by various private companies, show how these avant-garde performances lend poetic support to the coup's inauguration of a "new epoch." The narrator's assumptions that Wieder's rewriting of Genesis "was part of an advertising campaign" (25), and that the biblical command "FIAT LUX" referred to an Italian car, underscore the availability of Zurita's poetry to precisely the kind of appropriation by the economy against which CADA sought to immunize itself. Wieder's "ANTARTICA IS CHILE" (45) likewise points to the *avanzada's* potential to be reinscribed in state claims to territorial political sovereignty. Indeed,

nearly all of Wieder's acts point to an uncanny specularity between CADA's avant-garde "insubordination of the sign" and the fascist state's "avant-garde" anti-institutionalism.

Bolaño's Menardian rereading of the Chilean neoavant-garde thus underscores the latter's complicity with the dictatorship and its neo-liberal legacies—its participation, in the terms of Gareth Williams (citing Willy Thayer), in the coup's de facto "suspension of all law and political representation" ("Sovereignty and Melancholic Paralysis" 135). Wieder had been "called upon," the narrator says, "to show the world that the new regime and avant-garde art were not at odds, quite the contrary" (*Distant* 77). His art is an "art of the future" (84), an art for "gentlemen . . . not for herds" (84). It is art that, in its performance of "shock," turns "shock" into an instrument of war, just as Milton Friedman's Chicago boys had turned scientific findings on electroshock therapy's impact on personality into a methodology for rebooting the mindsets, economies, and political structures of whole nations.¹⁷ Against these developments in warfare, and against the co-option of even the most seemingly "subterranean" of political aesthetics, armed struggle and revolutionary forms of writing now seem powerless. This is a source of melancholy in *Distant Star*, with which we can engage further by turning to the novel's final moments. In so doing, we can also examine how Bolaño restores political value to the task of writing with the ghost of Pierre Menard by dwelling on Bolaño's appeal to doubles, twins, and heteronyms; for through these figures he not only deconstructs notions of responsibility central to the search for justice postdictatorship, but also lays the grounds for a positive rethinking of justice as that which is forever postponed, belated, *to come*, like the meanings of the individual texts produced under its deathly aegis.

Three-quarters of the way through the novel, the narrator, now living in Spain, meets a private detective, Romero. Romero asks him to identify, in texts published under various heteronyms, the authorship of Carlos Wieder, so that he can locate Wieder and avenge an anonymous client. The narrator complies. Over the course of the remaining chapters they succeed in locating Wieder in a small town on the Spanish Costa Brava, and Romero, it is inferred, kills him. The narrator is left, however, not with a sense of closure, but of unease. For there, sitting before him, the narrator tells us that prior to Wieder's death, he had been confronted with his own mirror image, a "vile Siamese twin" (144) or *doppelgänger* who undermines the enmity he had always felt for Wieder and leaves his selfhood in tatters. Given that the collaboration between poet and private

detective is from the very start framed as the outcome of the transition government's failure to bring military leaders to trial and do justice to their victims—the narrator underscores the fact that both he and the hack detective appear on the scene at precisely the moment when the state decides to forget Wieder in order to deal with more pressing present concerns—the novel's gear-change into the register of the thriller necessarily sets up its ending as a disappointment in advance. That is, it frames in advance its own *narrative* resolution of Wieder's spectral afterlife postcoup as a hasty, unsatisfactory solution to a problem that (like specters themselves) won't go away that easily and to a problem that certainly cannot be resolved in a single act of personal vengeance.

For Gareth Williams, the disquieting melancholia in which *Distant Star* is bathed not only derives from its account of the dismantling of traditional Left-wing politics; it also stems from the partial nature of Bolaño's deconstruction of the distinction between Weider and his "others," and from his apparently unconscious tendency to re-stantiate this division via a redrawing of the line between Left and Right that is displaced onto a host of paranoid friend-enemy hostilities haunting the entirety of the text. Bolaño, he concludes, appears unable to think politics outside the terms of Carl Schmitt's foundation of the political on the sovereign distinction between friend and enemy and remains haunted by the paranoid Schmittian logic that sustained dictatorship itself. However, we might nuance Williams's argument on the basis of Bolaño's striking play on the heteronym within the novel. This play 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.

In his essay "What Is an Author?" (1969), Foucault argued that the author's name serves to classify certain texts as one person's individual property and to constitute a unique interiority for that individual as a legal subject. This "author function," as he calls it, is a recent invention, and one whose emergence at a time of trenchant reforms in the human sciences partly explains the dual labor performed by modern notions of authorship in both literary and legal matters. Heteronymy confounds these links between literature and legal subjectivity, troubling not only the classification of different works under a single name, but also our ability to infer a homogeneously constituted self-

identical individual acting consistently beyond it. Heteronymity is not the same as pseudonymity. While the latter posits a distinction between the falsity of the name and the truth of the self, the former posits selfhood as something always already plural. In a legal scenario, the use of heteronyms would trouble ascriptions of responsibility, demanding that for justice to be done, we recognize at least two men in the figure of the criminal standing in the dock: if Wieder, then why not also Ruiz-Tagle? And if these two, then why not also Zurita, Borges, or even Cervantes and Menard?—we could keep adding to this list of names ad infinitum.

Distant Star is brimming with heteronyms. It also adds to the confusion created by the heteronym by including at least one double for each, and then, in turn, reframing each pair of doubles as heteronyms. Soto and Stein, for example, are initially set up as opposites in terms of their different degrees of politicization and divergent views of writing. Later, they seem to become synonyms for the Left-wing writer's demise in the hands of fascism, but they split again to reveal a Borgesian interplay between cowardice and heroism. Stein, the radical who claims a direct line of descent to Cherniakowski—a Russian Jew who had been a hero in World War II—probably dies a cowardly death after fleeing to the south to teach German and mend tractors during the dictatorship (*Distant* 63). Soto, his rival, who was never a socialist and whose “Left-wing pessimism” and “indifference” proved intolerable to certain radicals prior to the coup (66), dies a hero in exile as he is stabbed to death near the Spanish border for trying to stop a pair of neo-Nazi skinheads kick a tramp to death (71). Nowhere, however, is the play of heteronyms (and with it the interplay between heroism and cowardice, Left and Right, friend and enemy) more complex than in the case of Wieder, who remains enigmatically plural throughout. Indeed, there is nothing to suggest that Carlos Wieder is the “real” counterpart to his earlier “fictional” incarnation as “Ruiz-Tagle.” Neither is there any indication that any of the other heteronyms that he employs are “true” names. Indeed, heteronyms such as Octavio Pacheco (103), Okumura Masanobu (105), R. P. English (134), and Jules Defoe (139), as in “Pierre Menard, Author of Don Quixote,” redefine authorship itself in terms of an endless *mise-en-abîme* of intertextual relations, marking the most canonical of writers (at least by implication) with the stain of “fascism.” Even the pairing Ruiz-Tagle-Wieder turns out to be a substitute for another pair, when we read *Distant Star* alongside its precursor in *Nazi Literature of the Americas*: the story of Emilio Stevens and his transformation into “the infamous Ramírez Hoffmann” (177–204).

Such is the complexity of this perpetual proliferation of names and masks that Wieder's authorship of the crimes attributed to him remains speculative. One character contends that Wieder's poems are in fact "not *his* poems" (*Distant* 15, italics in original), another that even the Bible that he cites is one of a series to have been translated and reworked by others (36). These elements add complexity to Williams's claim that Bolaño keeps returning to the "melancholic reassembly" of the friend/enemy division ("Sovereignty and Melancholic Paralysis" 139), as they signal the constant splitting and blurring of all divisions into plurality and intertextuality. More importantly, they suggest a stronger desire on Bolaño's part to confound notions of criminal authorship—Wieder, Bolaño hints, is the fragile proper name of an author through whom an infinite host of literary and political revenants speak. It is precisely by confounding authorship in this manner that Bolaño underscores the failings of truth and reconciliation in postdictatorship Chile—failings to which the novel's unfolding as detective fiction also acts as testament when it posits the failure of the Chilean state's transitional government to indict criminals at the end of Chapter 8 as the precondition for Romero's and the narrator's involvement in the search for Wieder at the beginning of Chapter 9.

Although on one level it is the promise of cash that fuels the narrator's investment in the work of detection, he is also driven by a strong desire to distinguish himself from Weider. He does so, at first, by stressing their social differences and their divergence over matters aesthetic and political. Yet he immediately avows that these distinctions are overdetermined—he admits, for example, that jealousy over the Garmendia twins' attentions had clouded his judgment of Weider's poetry (*Distant* 5, 12). As the novel reaches its thrilling dénouement, the narrator can no longer sustain this production of difference. As he scours the poetry of Wieder's various heteronyms, he feels sick. He dreams that the two of them were clinging to the same barrel in the aftermath of a shipwreck. "Wieder and I had been travelling in the same boat," he realizes, before admitting that "[Wieder] may have conspired to sink it, but I had done little or nothing to stop it going down" (122). As he continues his reading, he feels his "whole life being sucked into the sewer" (124), and admits that he too had wanted to be included in the list of "New Chilean poets" (139–40). So why, then, does he feel not relief, but anxiety, when Romero kills his double, his *semblable*, his *frère*?

What induces this disquiet in the final analysis, and what bathes the novel in melancholy, is not just that in conspiring in Wieder's demise, the narrator has conspired with the "subordination of the public to the private" that the military had instantiated through its declaration

of the state of the exception (Williams, “Sovereignty and Melancholic Paralysis” 138). Neither is it entirely rooted in the realization that he has reaped private economic gains thanks to the incomplete process of social reparation under the transition, and that he too has consequently undergone the same transformation as Wieder: from poet to murderer. It is also that in conspiring in the killing of his double, he has killed a part of himself in the process, but only a part; that even though the narrator outlives Wieder, his double, Wieder in part remains at large. Like the *Wiederchrist* evoked by his name, Wieder is legion and keeps exceeding the proper names ascribed to him. He returns, like so many other specters, to haunt all efforts to repress him. What taunts the narrator, what gnaws away at him inside like the introjected lost object of melancholy that cannot be dislodged through mourning, is thus not only the otherwise disavowed desire for the now impossible and discredited distinction between friend and enemy, Left and Right, poet and criminal, but also the stubborn plurality of the other’s name and his own implication as part of that plurality. It is the sense that this plurality will return “again and again” to oppose and negate any sense that we are through with the horrors of the past. Romero’s final word of advice to the narrator, “Look after yourself my friend” (*Distant* 149), only adds to this sense of disquiet, implicating him in a work of justice that has yet to come about.

To write with Menard is, for Bolaño as it was for Borges, a means of restituting this plurality to the proper names of history. More specifically, for Bolaño, it restores the indeterminacy of the Chilean dictatorship and its legacies to that markedly plural, iterative name, “Wieder.” It alerts the reader to the possibility of Wieder’s return, even to the possibility of a future conspiracy between Wieder’s ghost and Menard’s own. It is a task of endless rewriting in which we too are implicated as authors and in which we can do justice to the past only by embracing the present’s openness to new understandings that are forever *to come*. Such openness to the future requires patience and may make us feel old—as old as the narrator who feels his age as he bids farewell to Romero, even as old as “the increasingly distant stars” (147) that he beholds as he waits for Romero to finish his dirty business. Like Kafka’s man who stands “before the law” waiting for his whole life to be admitted, that patience may even be confused with dutiful subservience to a sovereign power that keeps us waiting. However, if we wish to escape anachronism (where Menard failed), and assert the power of the letter to dissolve the sovereignty of violence, we must take heed of Bolaño’s final disquiet: a gunshot fired in the night might just hit a distant star, but it certainly won’t give rest to the ghosts of Latin America’s doomed revolutions.

Notes

1. All references to *Distant Star* are to Chris Andrews's English translation of 1998.
2. All translations of Borges's text are my own.
3. Sergio Villalobos-Ruminott, in a reflection on Bolaño's relationship with the archive of Latin American literature, notes that "as a good reader of Borges" he is less interested in preserving that archive than in exceeding and overturning its traditional preoccupations in inventive new ways ("A Kind of Hell" 193, 200). Ignacio López-Vicuña adds that, like Borges, Bolaño is "concerned with what we might call the savage reverse—the sinister double—of writing" ("The Violence of Writing" 156). Philip Derbyshire, noting parallels with Borges in Bolaño's creation of fictional works through "allusive titles or bad plot summaries," reads this Borgesian game of hide-and-seek as the point of departure for a reflection on the impossibility of poetry in Bolaño's universe. As he argues: "Bolaño's dilemma is clear. On the one hand he acknowledges the impossibility of the poetic even as he stages its pursuit, and on the other, he mistrusts the capacity of prose for representation, even as he pushes its production to the point of excess and exhaustion" ("*Los detectives salvajes*" 174).
4. The turn of phrase is Derrida's, from *Specters of Marx*.
5. See Balderston (1993, 1–17) and Sarlo (1993) for an account of such appropriations.
6. My understanding of the partial nature of this process is largely informed by the work of the Franco-Chilean critic Nelly Richard, in particular *Cultural Residues: Chile in Transition*.
7. Borges's "El escritor argentino y la tradición" was delivered as a lecture in 1951, and published in *Sur* in 1955. It was then added to later editions of *Discusión* (originally published in 1932), arguably with the intention of predating it.
8. See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*.
9. The terms of Balderston's argument are taken from Fredric Jameson's *The Political Unconscious* (see *Out of Context*, 12–13).
10. See García Canclini, *Culturas híbridas*.
11. See Fernando Ortiz, *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y el azúcar* (1940), and its later development as the basis of a theory of Latin American culture by Ángel Rama in *Transculturación narrativa en América Latina* (1982).
12. See González Echevarría, *Myth and Archive*.
13. See Fuentes, *La nueva novela hispanoamericana*.
14. See O'Bryen, "Mourning, Melancholia and Political Transition in *Amuleto* and *Nocturno de Chile* by Roberto Bolaño."
15. Longinus's and Burke's aesthetic treatises distinguish between the feminine realm of the "beautiful" and the masculine realm of the

“sublime,” and configure the relationship between the two usually in terms of the latter’s “violation” of the former. As Shaw notes, “[I]n Longinus . . . sublime speech ‘ravishes’ or rapes the listener; in Burke, the sublime is a virile masculine power, one that is contrasted with its passive feminine counterpart, the concept of the beautiful” (*The Sublime*, 10); see also the section “Engendering the Sublime and the Beautiful” (53–63).

16. Were one to pursue this reading further, one might comment on the culmination of Bolaño’s literary oeuvre in *2666*’s extensive fixation on the “femicides” that occur around the Mexican-US border.

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17.

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Chapter 2

Roberto Bolaño's Flower War: Memory, Melancholy, and Pierre Menard

Ignacio López-Calvo

In a previous study on Chilean novels written in exile after Augusto Pinochet's coup d'état in 1973, *Written in Exile: Chilean Fiction from 1973–Present* (2001), I analyzed this narrative corpus from the double theoretical perspective of exile and liberation theology. The study tried to show the evolution of this literature from a denunciatory and testimonial approach to a demythicizing one that, while still lamenting the social collapse and denouncing the human rights abuses committed by the junta, problematized the contradictions of a sometimes dogmatic Leftist discourse. Both the testimonials, for the most part written immediately after the coup, and the post-testimonial narratives questioned, through literature, the official discourse. Still within the context of demythicizing Chilean literature in exile, in this essay I shall analyze the reflection of this move from political activism to a melancholic skepticism and disappointment in Roberto Bolaño's body of work. I shall also consider the role of repetition in his writing, as an implementation of Jorge Luis Borges's theories presented in his short story "Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote" ("Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote"), from the 1944 collection *Ficciones*.

José Donoso's *Casa de Campo* (*A House in the Country*) and Jorge Edwards's *Los convidados de piedra* (*The Stone Guests*), two novels published in 1978, presented tense class conflicts in Chilean society and the decadence or lack of integrity of the middle class as a premonition of the social collapse that took over Chile in 1973. This type of self-criticism was a constant topic in Chilean literature written in exile after Pinochet's coup as well as in Bolaño's literature, which may also be considered part of Chilean literature in exile, since he had

originally planned to move back to Chile but had to cut his stay short because of the coup.

Moving on to testimonial accounts, Hernán Valdés's *Tejas Verdes, Diario de un campo de concentración en Chile* (*Tejas Verdes, Diary of a Concentration Camp*, 1974), Ilario Da's *Relato en el frente chileno* (*Account in the Chilean Front*, 1977), and Aníbal Quijada Cerda's *Cerco de Púas* (*Barbed-Wire Fence*, 1977), among other works, questioned the government's official history by exposing the military junta's human rights abuses as well as the support they received from the CIA, which these testimonialists considered to be part of an imperialist scheme. The utopian discourse that began with Salvador Allende's electoral triumph suddenly turned into the description of a dystopian nightmare. Along these lines, liberationist works, such as Antonio Skármeta's *La insurrección* (*The Insurrection*, 1982), Juan Villegas's *La visita del presidente* (*The President's Visit*, 1983), Lucía Guerra-Cunningham's *Muñeca brava* (*The Street of Night*, 1993), and Isabel Allende's *La casa de los espíritus* (*The House of the Spirits*, 1982), *De amor y de sombra* (*Of Love and Shadows*, 1984), and *Eva Luna* (1987) continued to protest the junta's oppression but offering this time a more nuanced denunciation. Tellingly, their protagonists, who often represented a model of revolutionary behavior against authoritarianism, tended to undergo a psychological evolution throughout the plot. Yet there was still no evident self-criticism or strong questioning of Leftist politics.

By contrast, demythicizing works responded to an introspective self-examination in search for the keys to the national collapse, which they often found in the middle-class man's or in the exile's values and daily behavior. In a way, this more reflective, demythicizing stage, which I termed "anti-epic literature," complemented or corrected previous denunciatory testimonial works, demythicizing what they considered to be errors in the Unidad Popular's rhetoric. This is evident in Poli Délano's *En este lugar sagrado* (*In This Sacred Place*, 1977) and *Casi los ingleses de América* (*Almost the Englishmen of America*, 1990), Hernán Valdés's *A partir del fin* (*Since the End*, 1981), Ariel Dorfman's *La última canción de Manuel Sendero* (*The Last Song of Manuel Sendero*, 1982), and Ana Vázquez's *Les Bisons, les Bonzes et le Dépotoir* (1977), translated into Spanish as *Los Búfalos, Los Jerarcas y La Huesera* (*The Buffalos, the Hierarchs and the Boneyard*), among many other works. Far from the somewhat idealized protagonist of testimonials and liberationist novels, the antihero protagonist in demythicizing novels rather than exposing external causes (US imperialism, Right-wing oppression) looks inward in search for the

causes and consequences of the institutional crisis. As a result, these texts, whose plots often take place in exile, become less descriptive and more reflective, sometimes even flirting with postmodern tendencies. They demythicize life in exile, highlighting the former militants' uprootedness, personal decadence, and lack of solidarity, or portraying them as abusive husbands. As we see in Fernando Alegría's *Coral de Guerra* (War Chorale, 1979), Ilario Da's *Una máquina para Chile* (A Machine for Chile, 1986), Ariel Dorfman's *Death and the Maiden* (1991), and Ana Vásquez's *Mi amiga Chantal* (My Friend Chantal, 1991), for example, characters end up becoming part of a national allegory, as metaphors for their social group or Chile itself. Even the figure of President Salvador Allende is desacralized in novels such as Hernán Valdés's *A partir del fin*, Teresa Hamel's *Leticia de Combarbala* (1988), and Jorge Edwards's *El anfitrión* (The Host, 1987). In all these works, although the guilt is never unfairly distributed in equal terms (the military is still the true culprit of the tragedy), self-criticism suggests that the repressive and dictatorial seed was already present in the essence of the middle-class man's values and behavior. In a way, this is how some writers find some sort of logic in an otherwise chaotic world.

This analysis of the Chilean demythicizing novel in exile sheds a decisive light on some of Bolaño's works. For instance, the short story "Últimos atardeceres en la tierra" ("Last Evenings on Earth"), from the collection *Putas asesinas* (*Murdering Whores*, 2001), includes memories of political defeat, violence, and what the protagonist calls Latin America's *guerras floridas* (flower wars), a term borrowed from the Meso-American concept of the *xōchiyaoyōtl*, an agreed war between indigenous communities in order to capture prisoners for ritual sacrifice, often in times of drought. This choice of the term "flower wars" suggests that violence is an essential component of life in the region since pre-Columbian times. It turns contemporary revolutions, dictatorships, wars, and femicides into a direct continuation of pre-Columbian indigenous violence, hence the seemingly out of context reference to Aztec human sacrifice in a conversation between Reiter and a young woman in *2666*: "a stone like a surgeon's table, where the Aztec priests or doctors lay their victims before tearing out their hearts" (698).¹ Bolaño's brief adventure in postcoup Chile (he arrived just before the coup and was imprisoned for eight days) is lightheartedly described in "Últimos atardeceres en la tierra" as a mere ritual, without heroic or epic overtones. Instead, the memories of the autobiographical protagonist, B., are mingled with his recalling of reading the works of a minor French poet, his interaction with

prostitutes at a Mexican brothel, and the description of his sense of relief once the plane arrived in Acapulco. Although at one point he mysteriously argues that certain things cannot be told, the minor, antiheroic tone of the events is emphasized by his father's reaction: when B. returns from Chile in 1974 and confesses to his father that he was almost killed, the latter simply asks "How many times?" (153)² before bursting out laughing. Not only is it evident that the protagonist's father does not take his son's imprisonment and near-death experience seriously, but the circumstances in which B. recalls them suggest that neither does he. In fact, Bolaño himself has spoken about his prison experience in a lighthearted tone in interviews such as the one published posthumously by the cultural magazine *Turria*, where he admitted:

I was detained for eight days, although a little while ago in Italy, I was asked, "What happened to you? Can you tell us a little about your half a year in prison? That's due to a misunderstanding in a German book where they had me in prison for half a year. At first they sentenced me to less time. It's the typical Latin American tango. In the first book edited for me in Germany, they gave me one month in prison; in the second book—seeing that the first one hadn't sold so well—they raised it to three months; in the third book I'm up to four months; in the fourth book it's five. The way it's going, I should still be a prisoner now. (Álvarez 78)³

Bolaño mentions the Latin American flower wars in several other texts, including his essay "El pasillo sin salida aparente" ("The Corridor with No Apparent Way Out") and his acceptance speech for the Rómulo Gallegos Prize. In this speech, he states: "Let this be clear: like Cervantes's veterans of Lepanto and like the veterans of the ceremonial wars of Latin America, all I have is my honor"⁴ ("Caracas Address" 36). Then, after comparing it with Cervantes's speech on arms and letters, he clarifies how important these flower wars have been for him as a source of inspiration:

Everything that I've written is a love letter or a farewell letter to my own generation, those of us who were born in the 1950s and who at a certain moment chose military service, though in this case it would be more accurate to say "militancy," and gave the little we had—the great deal that we had, which was our youth—to a cause that we thought was the most generous cause in the world and in a certain way it was, but in reality it wasn't. It goes without saying that we fought our hardest, but we had corrupt leaders, cowardly leaders with a propaganda apparatus

that was worse than a leper colony, we fought for parties that if they had won would have sent us straight to labor camps, we fought for and put all our generosity into an ideal that had been dead for more than fifty years, and some of us knew it, and how could we not when we'd read Trotsky or were Trotskyites, but we did it anyway, because we were stupid and generous, as young people are, giving everything and asking for nothing in return, and now those young people are gone, because those who didn't die in Bolivia died in Argentina or Peru, and those who survived went on to die in Chile or Mexico, and those who weren't killed there were killed later in Nicaragua, Colombia, or El Salvador. All of Latin America is sown with the bones of these forgotten youths. (35)⁵

These flower wars cast a long shadow in Bolaño's works, where we find a sad recollection of futile loss of youth and life, as well as a demythicizing, unheroic description of life in exile, despite the fact that, as Wilfrido Corral explains, Bolaño did not "think of himself as a memorialist of exile or of the woes of absence" (197).⁶ Thus, the short story "El Ojo Silva" ("Mauricio ['The Eye'] Silva"), also included in *Putas asesinas*, opens with the protagonist in the title trying to escape violence, even though, in the narrator's words, his generation (i.e., those who were around 20 years old when Salvador Allende died) can never escape true violence. The second paragraph clarifies that his experience is a synecdoche of his generation's trials and tribulations: "The case of The Eye is paradigmatic and exemplary" (106).⁷ In line with the Chilean demythicizing novel in exile, harsh criticism of Chilean exiles' behavior appears early in the fourth paragraph: "He wasn't like most of the Chileans living in Mexico City: he didn't brag about his role in the largely phantasmal resistance; he didn't frequent the various groups of Chileans in exile" (106).⁸ As in José Donoso's novel *El jardín de al lado* (*The Garden Next Door*, 1981), where the exiled protagonist exaggerates the ordeal of his prison experience to gain symbolic capital as a Chilean writer, in "El Ojo Silva" we are told that most Chilean exiles lie about their participation in the resistance against Pinochet's military junta.⁹ The open criticism continues throughout the first pages of the story: we learn that they gossiped about The Eye's homosexuality, because it "added a little spice to their rather boring lives. In spite of their left-wing convictions, when it came to sexuality, they reacted just like their enemies on the right, who had become the new masters of Chile" (107).¹⁰ And not only is the life of exiles boring rather than heroic or socially engaged, but they are also accused of being homophobic: The Eye confesses to the narrator that for years he felt compelled to hide his sexual preference

for fear of suffering the prejudice of fellow Leftists. At one point in the conversation between The Eye and the narrator, they rant against the Chilean Left and the narrator extends his criticism to all Latin American exiles: “I proposed a toast for the *wandering fighters of Chile*, a substantial subset of the *wandering fighters of Latin America*, a legion of orphans who, as the name suggests, wander the face of the earth offering their services to the highest bidder, who is almost always the lowest as well” (109; emphasis in the original).¹¹ In reality, The Eye, a rare positive example among Chilean exiles, is used as a point of contrast to expose the lack of integrity of other Chilean exiles.

Although the narrator realizes that The Eye would object to the generalizations he is making, he never truly backs down from his condemnation of Chilean exiles’ exaggerations, lies, and moral corruption, a criticism that at times seems somewhat disconnected from the rest of plot. The Eye goes on to save some young boys from castration and prostitution in India and, according to the narrative voice, this development should not surprise us: “the violence that will not let us be. The lot of Latin Americans born in the fifties” (117).¹² Toward the story’s end, after telling the narrator that the children he saved ended up dying of a disease in India, The Eye weeps back at his hotel for those children, for other castrated children he never knew, for his own lost youth, “for those who were young no longer youths and those who died young, for those who fought for Salvador Allende and those who were too scared to fight” (120).¹³ The short story therefore ends with nostalgia and disappointment for the end of a utopian dream and with the acknowledgment of the inescapable violence that follows Latin Americans born in the 1950s no matter where they go. All things considered, The Eye’s adventures in India are nothing but a desperate continuation of the same pursuit of justice for which his nonconformist generation had lost its youth. An omnipresent sense of melancholy and ontological failure seems to overwhelm The Eye, the narrator and, by extension, their implied author. Yet, just like Bolaño in the novel *Amuleto* (*Amulet*, 1999), who bravely rescues the young gay poet from his pimp, here The Eye is courageous enough to fight yet another battle. Despite his profound disappointment, he has not given up on his struggle for social justice and, at least for some time, he is able to win a minor battle in India. As seen, some of Bolaño’s characters have not entirely thrown in the towel, as Jean Franco seems to suggest in her essay “Questions for Bolaño”; behind their apparent resignation, they continue to fight, even if they now fight in minor, local battles. Bolaño himself refuses to see his own

literature as pessimistic: “[My texts] are quite optimistic, because my characters do not commit suicide, they resist. At least not all commit suicide.”¹⁴

Along these lines, the short story “Días de 1978” (“Days of 1978”), included in *Putas asesinas*, opens with the presumably autobiographical protagonist, B., attending a party organized by Chilean exiles. We learn that he dislikes Chilean exiles in Barcelona, despite being one of them. During the party, he has a violent argument with another Chilean Leftist man (a member of the *Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria* [Movement of the Revolutionary Left; MIR]), who, by the story’s end, commits suicide in France. The omniscient narrator describes, in the present tense, B.’s disappointment with the Chilean Left: “U’s violence bitterly disappoints B, Because U was and possibly still is an active member of the Left-wing party to which he himself, at this point in his life, is most sympathetic. Once again reality has proven that no particular group has a monopoly over demagoguery, dogmatism, and ignorance” (159).¹⁵ U’s suicide leaves the protagonist with a feeling of guilt and sadness. This contact with other Chilean exiles only accelerates his increasing melancholia and his disappointment in a Chilean Left to which he used to belong.

Bolaño’s criticism goes beyond the world of exiles. Other short stories expose how some Leftists who stayed in Chile during and after the coup ended up betraying the cause. That is the case of the two soldiers in “Detectives” (“Detectives”), included in the collection *Llamadas telefónicas* (*Last Evenings on Earth*, 1997), who serve the dictatorship, even though they claim to have been imprisoned for three days immediately after the coup. On two different occasions, they show their feeling of guilt by reminding Belano (again Bolaño’s alter ego) that they secretly continue to be Leftists. In spite of their regret for having killed so many brave, young men in 1973, the two detectives admit with no grief that they raped prostitutes every night and that they would have tortured prisoners had they been asked to do so. One of them even considered killing Arturo Belano, his former classmate. This story is, of course, a retelling of Bolaño’s brief imprisonment in Chile, before actually being saved by former classmates who had become prison guards. In the fictional tale, the events are remembered years later through a dialogue between two characters that exposes, once again, the shortcomings of the Chilean Left, including its youngest militants (they were 20 years old at the time of the coup). In fact, this short story presents the most extreme case: that of formerly imprisoned militants who betray their original cause to the point of killing many of their former comrades and raping

imprisoned prostitutes on a daily basis. The solemnity of the condemnation is emphasized by the fact that the story is based on the author's real-life prison experiences in Chile.

Bolaño brings up again his imprisonment in his 1993 novel *La pista de hielo* (*The Skating Ring*), the last chapter of *La literatura nazi en América* (*Nazi Literature in the Americas*, 1996), his short story "Compañeros de celda" ("Cell Mates"), also included in *Llamadas telefónicas*, and "Carnet de Baile" ("Dance Card"), from *Putas asesinas*. In this last short story, the first-person narrator explains that in August of 1973 he returned to Chile, after a long trip through land and sea, with the goal of participating in the construction of socialism. As in the other texts, instead of attaching epic or heroic overtones to his actions, the narrator confesses that on the day of the coup, he volunteered for a neighborhood cell, but ended up keeping an eye on an empty street and forgetting the password he was given; in his own words, "for me, the eleventh of September was a comic as well as bloody spectacle" (214).¹⁶ Bolaño then nonchalantly mixes memories of his political activism in Chile with those of recent readings and even a commentary on the library of the communist worker who ran the neighborhood cell. One day, traveling by bus from Los Ángeles, capital of the province of Bío-Bío, to Concepción, he is arrested and imprisoned under the suspicion of being a foreign terrorist. The narrator recalls that although he was not tortured, he was given no food or blankets and survived only thanks to the other prisoners' charity. This time, his criticism of Chileans (very similar to the one expressed by Poli Délano in *Casi los ingleses de América*) comes after explaining that he was saved by two former high school classmates and his friend Fernando Fernández, who "possessed of a composure comparable to that of the idealized Englishman on whom Chileans were desperately and vainly trying to model themselves" (215).¹⁷

In contrast with previous stories, however, the exiled Chileans portrayed here are not bored people or *bon vivants* but brutally tortured women who may have inspired Bolaño's interest in the torture of women in Ciudad Juárez, fictionalized in *2666*: "In Mexico I heard the story of a young woman from the MIR who had been tortured by having live rats put into her vagina. This woman managed to get out of the country and went to Mexico City. There she lived, but each day she grew sadder, until one day the sadness killed her" (215).¹⁸ According to the narrator, this story seems ubiquitous: it also happened to a Chilean woman exiled in Paris and to another one in Stockholm, which makes him wonder whether it may be the

same woman in all three cases. Then, he mentions the trials of three Argentinean brothers who died in three different Latin American revolutions, after betraying one another. In line with Bolaño's penchant for irony and sarcasm, he mixes these terribly sad stories with his recollection of apparitions of Hitler and Neruda in the hall of his home, only to close the story with the sadness of remembering all the young Latin Americans who lost their life in pursuit of a utopian dream: "all those who believed in a Latin American paradise and died in a Latin American hell. I think of their works, which may, perhaps, show the Left a way out of the pit of shame and futility" (218).¹⁹ The last words of this quotation expose the protagonist's (and presumably also his author's) disappointment with the Latin American Left and leave the same aftertaste of sadness and melancholy seen in other texts. Perhaps even more tragically for Bolaño, the failure of the revolution carries with it the inevitable demise of the avant-garde. As Ignacio Echevarría points out, "The revolutionary project, therefore, was inseparable, for Bolaño, from the artistic project. And the failure of the first entailed that of the second."²⁰

Paradoxically, in other texts, such as the essay "Exilios" ("Exiles"), Bolaño nostalgically remembers the excitement of the five months he spent in Chile immediately after the coup:

In any case, and despite the collective disasters and my small personal misfortunes, I remember the days after the coup as full days, crammed with energy, crammed with eroticism, days and nights in which anything could happen. There's no way I'd wish a twentieth year like that on my son, but I should also acknowledge that it was an unforgettable year. The experience of love, black humor, friendship, prison, and the threat of death were condensed into no more than five interminable months that I lived in a state of amazement and urgency. (53)²¹

Memories of adventure and joy of living, therefore, are mixed with the terrible disappointment for the futility of resistance. Even if the youthful idealism has vanished, several of Bolaño's characters continue to be courageous and nonconformist, fighting minor battles until the end.

Switching now to Bolaño's novels, in *Los detectives salvajes* (*The Savage Detectives*, 1998), self-criticism becomes even harsher. As if Bolaño were trying to put into practice Borges's theories in his short story "Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote" about rewriting the same paragraphs in different contexts and from different narrative perspectives, we are told again that Arturo Belano returned to his homeland "to join the revolution" (178),²² after a long and dangerous trip, but

ended up absurdly guarding an empty street on September 11, 1973. If Borges's ironic assertions are true, the literal rewriting of the paragraphs serves a specific purpose: the paragraphs are almost identical word by word, but different; they are not a copy or a mechanical transcription. According to the narrator of Borges's "Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote," the text written by the French symbolist in the title is infinitely richer and more ambiguous than Cervantes's: the new, contemporary context and narrative perspective have provided a wealth of connotations that were missing in the original text. As Santiago Juan-Navarro points out, "The possibility of reading previous works from new points of view ends up modifying the original work, multiplying to infinity its potential for meaning."²³ The same must happen, then, with the new, almost identical paragraphs that Bolaño is rewriting: rather than being self-plagiarism, these non-hierarchical variations of the same story must gain in connotative value as the story expands rhizomatically in his opus, without necessarily reaching a conclusion. In this context, it is important to keep in mind that Bolaño conceived of his oeuvre as a cohesive unit and declared, in several interviews, that all his books are related with one another and that, for this reason, the best way to understand them was to read all of them: "In a very humble way I conceive of the totality of my oeuvre in prose and even a part of my poetry as a whole. A whole that is not only stylistic, but also in the storyline: characters constantly dialog among themselves, appear and disappear."²⁴

Perhaps, just as Menard rewrites Cervantes's work and Cervantes parodically rewrites the Spanish literary tradition in his masterpiece, Bolaño may be rewriting the denunciatory and liberationist Chilean literature in exile, of which he was famously critical: "Of Chilean literature in exile I would say, first, that it is not literature and secondly, it is not in exile either. Essentially, there is not a Chilean literature in exile, and the one there is, in my opinion, quite bad."²⁵ Indeed, in his essay "Sobre la literatura, el premio nacional de literatura y los raros consuelos del oficio" ("On Literature, the National Literary Prize, and the Rare Consolations of the Writing Life"), Bolaño was particularly harsh with Isabel Allende, Antonio Skármeta, and Volodia Teitelboim, who are later placed in the context of an unflattering view of Chilean literature in general: "Chilean literature, so prestigious in Chile, can boast of only five names worth citing: remember this as a critical and self-critical exercise" (113).²⁶ From the perspective of this disdain for testimonial and liberationist literature in exile, his own militant experience is ultimately described in *Los detectives salvajes* as the traditional rite of passage of Latin American machismo: "the

journey of initiation of all poor Latin American boys, crossing this absurd continent" (178).²⁷

Upon his return to Mexico, we learn, Belano began to frequent younger friends like Ulises Lima and to mock his former friends, all the while keeping his macho ego safe, a reference to machismo that is unfortunately more apparent in the Spanish-language original than in its English-language translation: "Arturito had done his duty, and his conscience, the terrible conscience of a young Latin American male ["machito" in the original], had nothing with which to reproach itself" (178).²⁸ Moreover, he feels that during his brief imprisonment "he behaved like a man" (178).²⁹ The protagonist's actions, therefore, are interpreted as a sort of macho posturing, a view that is corroborated in an interview carried out by Daniel Swinburn, where Bolaño answers: "In the case of my generation, well, our valor was as big as our innocence or stupidity. Let's say that in that epic, *what counted was the gesture*. Through gestures one constructed his own learning novel, something that, on second thought, is quite silly and eventually, if things had been different, would have turned us into victims"³⁰ (the italics are mine). Even more surprisingly, in another interview, this time carried out by Ima Sanchís, his involvement in revolutionary activities is actually presented as a continuation of his violent nature. To the question of whether he was a destructive boy, the author answers: "Yes, and I would show off being bad, but I'm embarrassed to tell you. I did not rob or rape, but I was a violent youth. At age nineteen, I decided that I wanted to join the revolution."³¹

To continue with the parodic nature of much of *Los detectives salvajes*, although his new friend Ulises Lima claims that they are formerly imprisoned revolutionaries, he and Belano are often described as drug dealers, rather than as heroic freedom fighters or exiles. At any rate, throughout the book Belano's friends remember how he would tell "stories about friends who had died in the guerrilla wars of Latin America" (387).³² The futility of these deaths is still an overwhelming feeling, but by blending with machismo, snobbery, and drug dealing, the author somewhat ruins the testimonial or denunciatory potential of these paragraphs. In other words, Bolaño intentionally undermines his own literary denunciation and even his own traumatic real-life experience to mock indirectly the values of the Chilean (and, by extension, Latin American) Left, as well as the Chilean literature written in and about exile.

Likewise, in Chapter 19, the narrator's sarcasm about the comments made by a group of Chilean exiles who meet in a Parisian café to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the September 11 coup

takes over the solemnity of the moment: “A group of masochistic Chileans had gathered to remember that dismal day... Suddenly someone, I don’t know who, started to talk about evil, about the crime that had spread its enormous black wing over us. Please! Its enormous black wing! It’s clear we Chileans will never learn” (373).³³ But, suddenly, what seems to be a simple mockery of a poor choice of lyrical language ends up turning into a conversation about evil in general (a key topic in Bolaño’s opus), which may provide clues to understand one of Bolaño’s masterpieces, *2666*:

Belano, I said, the heart of the matter is knowing whether evil (or sin or crime or whatever you want to call it) is random or purposeful. If it’s purposeful, we can fight it, it’s hard to defeat, but we have a chance, like two boxers in the same weight class, more or less. If it’s random, on the other hand, we’re fucked, and we’ll just have to hope that God, if He exists, has mercy on us. And that’s what it all comes down to. (373)³⁴

In any case, the image of Latin American exiles and emigrants in Spain remains quite negative, as seen in the description of the queues formed to use broken public telephones: “The best and the worst of Latin America came together in those lines, the old revolutionaries and the rapists, the former political prisoners and the hawkers of junk jewelry” (387).³⁵ These paragraphs add to the ongoing demythicization of the Leftist social struggle in Latin America and of the exile experience that runs through many of Bolaño’s works.

As if Bolaño were trying to make sure that his message is received, and again using Pierre Menard’s narrative tricks, the same rite-of-passage trip to Chile reappears in his novel *Amuleto*, where, coinciding with Poli Délano’s novel *En este lugar sagrado*, the protagonist and first-person narrator hides in a public toilet while major social changes are taking place outside. This time, it is Auxilio Lacouture, the Uruguayan narrator and self-appointed “mother of the new Mexican poetry” (37),³⁶ who informs us about Arturo Belano’s experience in Chile and his return to Mexico. She describes how proud he was about Salvador Allende’s victory in the Chilean presidential elections, his desire to participate in the revolution, and his long and dangerous trip to Chile: “an initiation, a Latin American grand tour on a shoestring, wandering the length of our absurd continent, which we keep misunderstanding or simply not understanding at all” (70).³⁷ Then, the trip is again pejoratively described in the context of Latin American machismo: “When Arturo returned to Mexico in January

1974, he was different. Allende had been overthrown, and Arturito had done his duty, so his sister told me; 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).³⁸ We are told that upon his return to Mexico, Belano changed so much that his friends no longer recognized him. He begins to look down on them, to mock them, and to go out with younger friends, selling marihuana and other drugs. Lacouture also recalls the participation of Belano's family in a Mexico City demonstration against Pinochet's coup, at a time when they still did not know about Belano's whereabouts. At one point, she considers the possibility that the young man has met his Latin American fate: "Perhaps Arturito is already dead, I thought, perhaps that lonely valley is an emblem of death, because death is the staff of Latin America and Latin America cannot walk without its staff" (75).³⁹

Once he returns to Mexico, Belano's friends and peers expect him to describe the horror of the Chilean coup, but he remains quiet and seemingly indolent, while his behavior is still described in terms of Latin American machismo: "For them, Arturito now belonged to the category of those who have seen death at close range, and the subcategory of hard men, and, that, in the eyes of those desperate Latin American kids, was a qualification that demanded respect, a veritable compendium of medals" (80).⁴⁰ The autobiographical nature of this passage is corroborated in an interview with Ima Sanchís, where Bolaño admits that upon returning to Mexico he adopted a new attitude: "I devoted myself to writing with my war veteran aura."⁴¹ For some unknown reason, in *Amuleto* Lacouture, who knows that Belano spent eight days in prison behaving bravely but was not tortured, decides to exaggerate his deeds and invent others, always surrounding them with a heroic aura: "I painted his return with colors borrowed from the palette of epic poetry" (80).⁴² Although most of Belano's friends do not fully believe all of Lacouture's stories, one of them, Ernesto San Epifanio, does think that his fearless Chilean friend can save him from a man who is forcing him into a life of prostitution. Against all odds, Belano agrees to help him and manages to intimidate the pimp, saving not only San Epifanio but also another young gay poet, Juan de Dios Montes, who was about to die. According to Lacouture, Belano had suddenly been promoted to the rank of veteran of Latin America's flower wars. The novel ends with Lacouture listening to the voice of an angel who knows the whereabouts of her continent's youth. The self-proclaimed mother of Mexican poetry now sounds like the melancholic mother of an entire

generation of Latin American youngsters who naïvely gave their life hoping to create a better world. The last lines explain the novel's title: "And although the song that I heard was about war, about the heroic deeds of a whole generation of young Latin Americans led to sacrifice, I knew that above and beyond all, it was about courage and mirrors, desire and pleasure. And that song is our amulet" (184).⁴³

In spite of the overall sense of disappointment, then, the reader can easily perceive the implicit author's sympathy for these Latin American youngsters and their outlook on life. In fact, Bolaño considered himself a survivor from this struggle and expressed his admiration for this attitude in several interviews: "I feel enormous affection toward this project, notwithstanding its excesses, immoderations and deviations. The project is hopelessly romantic, essentially revolutionary, and it has seen the failure of many groups and generations of artists" (Soto 46). Yet Jean Franco's analysis of Bolaño's perspective of Leftist Latin American struggles in Latin America is more negative: "Destitute of belief after the disasters of the twentieth century, Bolaño's characters have little left to amuse themselves besides occasional friendships and trivial pursuits including literature. Survivors of a great disaster, they are left chasing an always elusive real" (208). Indeed, in *Amuleto* Belano, the jaded veteran of the Latin American flower wars, acts with complete disregard for his own life, as if he no longer had anything to lose, other than literature and the fleeting friendship of a young man in need of help. The grand narrative of socialism no longer holds the key to a new and improved world, but the new neoliberal Latin America is not a welcoming place for Bolaño's characters either, as Nicholas Birns points out in his study, which is included in this volume. Seemingly, all that is left is Baudelaire's *ennui*, as expressed in the epigraph to *2666*: "An oasis of horror in a desert of boredom."⁴⁴ Yet, regardless of the reason, Belano, like Mauricio "The Eye" Silva, still has the courage to fight and win a minor battle, this time in Mexico City.

The same topic resurfaces in Bolaño's novel *Estrella distante* (*Distant Star*, 1996), where the first-person narrator claims, in a sort of preface, that he heard the story of Lieutenant Ramírez Hoffman from Arturo B., "a veteran of Latin America's doomed revolutions, who tried to get himself killed in Africa" (1).⁴⁵ Addressing the aforementioned fact that many of his paragraphs are repeated from one text to the next, and perhaps giving us a clue about one of the ways in which an active reader can approach Bolaño's works, he mentions his discussions about "the reuse of numerous paragraphs with Arturo

and the increasingly animated ghost of Pierre Menard" (1).⁴⁶ In fact, as is well known, this ghost is still present in *Estrella distante* itself, a rewriting or expansion ("explosion," in the words of Bolaño's fictional alter ego) of the last chapter of *La literatura nazi en América*, just like *Amuleto* is an expansion of an episode in *Los detectives salvajes*, and *Nocturno de Chile* (*By Night in Chile*, 2000), according to Ignacio Echevarría, is a rewriting of his crónica "El pasillo sin salida aparente" ("The Corridor with No Apparent Way Out") ("Bolaño internacional" 186).

The epigraph from Augusto Monterroso at the beginning of *La literatura nazi en América*, which corrects Heraclitus's idea that one cannot swim twice in the same river, is yet another way to vindicate the power and productiveness of rewriting. Readers must therefore assume that even if the paragraphs are similar from one work to the next, the different points of view and literary contexts (whereas *Estrella distante* is an independent novella or short novel, "Carlos Ramírez Hoffman" is just one of several chapters in a sort of collection of literary stories or fictional literary biographical encyclopedia that Bolaño liked to consider a novel) separate the two texts, making them increasingly richer and more ambiguous. Perhaps this should be read in the context of Bolaño's assertion, in several interviews, that he has always been writing the same book and that, when all is said and done, all authors are always writing the same book.

The young and naïve Leftist poets who participate in a 1970s poetry workshop in Concepción, Chile, in the first pages of *Estrella distante*, represent the dreamy Latin American youth that was looking forward to the utopian changes that the socialist revolution was supposed to bring:

the armed struggle that would usher in a new life and a new era, so we thought, but which, for most of us, was like a dream, or rather the key that would open the door into a world of dreams, the only dreams worth living for. And even though we were vaguely aware that dreams often turn into nightmares, we didn't let that bother us. (3)⁴⁷

The narrator mocks the Marxist jargon they often use and then presents the director of the poetry workshop, Juan Stein, as a case study of the fatal destiny of many of these young Latin American poets. While it is not clear whether he is dead or alive, rumors have him fighting alongside guerrillas and revolutions in Nicaragua, Angola, Paraguay, Colombia, and El Salvador: "He appeared and disappeared

like a ghost wherever there was fighting, wherever desperate, generous, mad, courageous, despicable Latin Americans were destroying, rebuilding and redestroying reality, in a final bid that was doomed to failure” (57).⁴⁸ Yet all these stories are surrounded by myth and exaggeration. Tellingly, talking about the exile in Europe of another character, Soto, the narrator states: “According to the melancholy folklore of exile—made up of stories that, as often as not, are fabrications or pale copies of what really happened—one night another Chilean gave him such a terrible beating that he ended up in a Berlin hospital” (66).⁴⁹ Bolaño’s readers may then wonder, if half of the stories about exile are fake, are Bolaño’s autobiographical stories also questionable? Be that as it may, in the end the effort of many of his characters, like that of so many young and hopeful Latin Americans, seems to have been in vain, a waste of energy and life. Yet some continue to fight until the end.

The same worldview is reflected in some of Bolaño’s poems. “Autorretrato a los veinte años” (“Self Portrait at Twenty Years”), included in the collections *Los perros románticos* (*The Romantic Dogs*, 2006), envisions this same loss of innocent life:

And it was impossible to close my eyes and miss seeing
that strange spectacle, slow and strange,
though fixed in such a swift reality:
thousands of guys like me, baby-faced
or bearded, but Latin American, all of us,
brushing cheeks with death. (5)⁵⁰

Likewise, in “La visita al convaleciente” (“Visit to the Convalescent”), from the same collection, the poetic voice talks about the early failure of the revolution:

It’s 1976 and the Revolution has been defeated
but we’ve yet to find out.
We are 22, 23 years old.
...
It’s 1976 and even though all the doors seem to be open,
in fact, if we paid attention, we’d be able to hear how
one by one the doors are closing. (57)⁵¹

Bolaño also mentions his lost youth and the lost youth of his countrymen in “El último canto de amor de Pedro J. Lastarria, alias ‘El Chorito’” (“The Last Love Song of Pedro J. Lastarria, Alias

‘El Chorito’”). Still in the same collection, “Los pasos de Parra” (“Parra’s Footsteps”) continues to describe the end of the utopian dream:

The revolution is called Atlantis
 And it’s ferocious and infinite
 But it’s totally pointless
 ...
 There where the only things heard are
 Parra’s footsteps
 And the dreams of generations
 Sacrificed beneath the wheel
 Unchronicled. (131)⁵²

If Bolaño’s poems in *The Romantic Dogs* are interconnected in themes and style with his short stories and novels, so are they with other collections of poems, such as *Tres (Three)*. Thus in the section “Un paseo por la literatura” (“A Stroll through Literature”), we read: “I dreamt that I was dreaming, we’d lost the revolution before launching it and I decided to go home” (132).⁵³ Then, his typical rewriting takes place: “I dreamt I was dreaming and in the dream tunnels I found Roque Dalton’s dream: the dream of the brave ones who died for a fucking chimera” (157).⁵⁴ And later, the flower wars resurface: “I dreamt the dreamers had gone to the flower war. No one had come back. On the planks of forgotten barracks in the mountains I managed to make out a few names. From far away a voice was broadcasting over and over the orders by which they’d been condemned” (167).⁵⁵

In another example of this rewriting exercise, in the chapter (or pseudoencyclopedic entry) “Harry Sibelious” in *La literatura nazi en América*, we are told that in his novel *The True Son of Job*, Sibelious reflected on Borges’s story by modeling its structure on that of Toynbee’s *Hitler’s Europe*. Sibelious entitles his prologue like Toynbee’s and then transcribes word by word a passage from the English historian, which will paradoxically have an entirely new meaning: “Sibelius, of course, is animated by intentions of an entirely different nature. In the final analysis, the British professor’s aim is to testify against crime and ignominy, lest we forget. The Virginian novelist seems to believe that ‘somewhere in time and space’ the crime in question has definitely triumphed, so he proceeds to catalogue it” (121).⁵⁶ Whereas Toynbee reflects historical facts, we are told, Sibelious offers a distortion of reality. The American novelist then proceeds to borrow characters from numerous other writers and filmmakers.

Bolaño, therefore, provides an additional twist to Borges's devise, a sort of double of Menard, Cervantes's double.

Rewriting runs, as we have seen, throughout Bolaño's oeuvre. In yet another example, the passage from *Los detectives salvajes* where the gay poet Ernesto San Epifanio distinguishes, according to their attitude toward ethics and aesthetics (and with no pejorative implications), between poets who are queers (*maricas*), faggots (*maricones*), and so on reappears in the first pages of the posthumous *Los sinsabores del verdadero policía* (*Woes of the True Policeman*, 2011). In this last work, the *déjà vu* continues when we see Amalfitano recall his Leftist activism when he was a student, his utopian (and naïve) faith in change, his being tortured in the Tejas Verdes concentration camp, only to question once again the blindness and lack of self-criticism of these Leftist groups: "I who predicted the fall of Allende and yet did nothing to prepare for it . . . I who kept up my ties with leftist groups, that gallery of romantics (or modernists), gunmen, psychopaths, dogmatic people, and fools, all brave notwithstanding, but what good is bravery? How long do we have to keep being brave?" (21).⁵⁷ His job as a college professor in Santa Teresa and his fear for his daughter's well-being in this fictional Mexican city or Arcimboldi's (here without the h) disappearance, along with other episodes (the Andalusian in the Blue Division tortured by the Russians; the rape, torture, and killings of young women in Santa Teresa; the five generations of raped women since 1865) that also appear in *2666*, only add to the feeling of *déjà vu*. On the other hand, Amalfitano's joy of living as "a dissident in a civilized country"⁵⁸ (23), his desire to be (or to be with) a young man, Padilla, and his disappointment in his daughter Rosa's lack of interest in Chilean matters are all reminiscent of José Donoso's *El jardín de al lado* (*The Garden Next Door*) and other Chilean exile novels. Then, we find "Otro cuento ruso" ("Another Russian Tale") turned into Chapter seven of Part II. According to Echevarría, the reason for this repetition is that *Los sinsabores del verdadero policía* is not a novel: "they are materials aimed at a project for a novel that was eventually set aside, some of whose narrative lines led to *2666*, while others were left on hold, useless, or pending to be retaken by the author."⁵⁹ Likewise, the barbaric writers also appear in *Estrella distante* and the story about the soldiers who raped Rimbaud is also present in *Los detectives salvajes*.

The anecdote told by several Latin American writers about Bolaño's retelling of the same joke in several different variations may be one of the clues to understand how the Chilean virtuoso understood literature: the same story can provide different messages when told several times in different styles, using different types of discourses or literary

forms, from different points of view or in different contexts, and readers must become savage detectives in search of meaning. As seen, throughout his oeuvre Bolaño melancholically pays homage time and again to the hopeful Latin American youths who risked or lost their lives in hopes of creating a better, new world.⁶⁰ This homage, however, is blended with resentment for those who, both in Chile and in exile, betrayed their own ideals.

Several critics have noticed the recurrence of melancholy in Bolaño's oeuvre. Carlos Franz, for example, wonders, "Almost all of B.'s books are fiercely melancholic (ferocity and melancholy, concomitantly). So much so that they dangerously border on sentimentalism—B. borders everything dangerously—and then they fully walk into it. And then they 'drown' in that melancholy and come out stronger, almost invulnerable. How the heck did B. do it?"⁶¹ Franz also points out that his characters' melancholy is mixed with wrath and resentment, which he considers part of the author's nihilist aesthetics. Indeed, Bolaño's self-deprecating descriptions of his alter ego character Arturo Belano confirm his ultimate disappointment with the Latin American Left and the flower wars they lost. In a way, Cervantes's famous "Discurso de las armas y las letras" (Discourse on arms and letters; for him, the symbolic capital of having served as a soldier fighting for the Spanish Empire was superior to any capital attained as a writer), which Bolaño mentioned in his "Caracas Address," is reversed in the Chilean author's oeuvre: risking his life as a young man fighting for the construction of socialism in his fatherland is seen as a futile and somewhat absurd enterprise; only writing about it, that is, the letters, his literary activity, save him, giving him the "respectability" he needed.⁶² As stated, regardless of how futile the efforts were, Bolaño never ceases to admire these young Latin Americans' valor. This is evident in his essay "Acerca de *Los detectives salvajes*" ("About *The Savage Detectives*"), where he states: "The novel tries to reflect a kind of generational defeat and also the happiness of a generation, a happiness that at times delineated courage and the limits of courage" (353).⁶³ The author, however, is careful not to try to portray himself as the voice of Chileans. In fact, as if Bolaño were talking about himself, in *Los sinsabores del verdadero policía* we read: "(Though what Amalfitano *knew* about Chileans was only supposition, considering how long it had been since he'd associated with any of them)" (87; emphasis in the original). In any case, judging by his reputation as the most influential Latin American writer of his generation, he turned his failure as a militant into a success as a man of letters. And in this ultimate effort to gain cultural capital as a writer, the techniques recommended by Borges's Pierre Menard became a successful tool for

communication, criticism, and parody. Bolaño rehashes over and over again the same stories, as if he were implementing Menard's theories or Raymond Queneau's 99 exercises in style, often paying homage to Latin Americans of his generation who lost their youth in a futile struggle to pursue a utopian ideal of liberation.

Notes

1. "una piedra semejante a la mesa de un quirófano, en donde los sacerdotes o médicos aztecas extendían a sus víctimas antes de arrancarles el corazón" (872).
2. "¿Cuántas veces?" (260).
3. "Estuve detenido por 8 días, aunque hace poco en Italia me preguntaron: ¿cómo fue su experiencia de pasar medio año en prisión? Se debe a un error de una edición alemana, donde pusieron que había estado seis meses en la cárcel... Es el típico tango latinoamericano. En el primer libro mío publicado en alemán pusieron que había estado un mes; en el segundo—viendo que el primero no había vendido mucho—lo elevaron a tres meses; en el tercero subí a cuatro y en el cuarto fueron cinco meses. Así como va el asunto, debería estar prisionero hasta el día de hoy" ("Roberto Bolaño. Cómo se forjó" n.p.).
4. "Esto que quede claro, pues como los veteranos del Lepanto de Cervantes y como los veteranos de las guerras floridas de Latinoamérica mi única riqueza es mi honra" (39).
5. "todo lo que he escrito es una carta de amor o de despedida a mi propia generación, los que nacimos en la década del cincuenta y los que escogimos en un momento dado el ejercicio de la milicia, en este caso sería más correcto decir la militancia, y entregamos lo poco que teníamos, lo mucho que teníamos, que era nuestra juventud, a una causa que creímos la más generosa de las causas del mundo y que en cierta forma lo era, pero que en la realidad no lo era. De más está decir que luchamos a brazo partido, pero tuvimos jefes corruptos, líderes cobardes, un aparato de propaganda que era peor que una leprosería, luchamos por partidos que de haber vencido nos habrían enviado de inmediato a un campo de trabajos forzados, luchamos y pusimos toda nuestra generosidad en un ideal que hacía más de cincuenta años que estaba muerto, y algunos lo sabíamos, y cómo no lo íbamos a saber si habíamos leído a Trotski o éramos trotskistas, pero igual lo hicimos, porque fuimos estúpidos y generosos, como son los jóvenes, que todo lo entregan y no piden nada a cambio, y ahora de esos jóvenes ya no queda nada, los que no murieron en Bolivia murieron en Argentina o en Perú, y los que sobrevivieron se fueron a morir a Chile o a México, y a los que no mataron allí los mataron después en Nicaragua, en Colombia, en El Salvador. Toda Latinoamérica está sembrada con los huesos de estos jóvenes olvidados" (37–38).

6. “ni se pensó a sí mismo como memorialista del exilio o de los males de la ausencia” (197).
7. “El caso del Ojo es paradigmático y ejemplar” (215).
8. “No era como la mayoría de los chilenos que por entonces vivían en el DF: no se vanagloriaba de haber participado en una resistencia más fantasmal que real, no frecuentaba los círculos de exiliados” (215).
9. Bolaño analyzed *El jardín de al lado* in his essay “El misterio transparente de José Donoso” (“The Transparent Mystery of José Donoso”), included in the collection *Entre parenthesis (Between Parentheses)*.
10. “alimentaba la vida más bien aburrida de los exiliados, gente de izquierdas que pensaba, al menos de cintura para abajo, exactamente igual que la gente de derechas que en aquel tiempo se enseñoreaba de Chile” (216).
11. “yo brindé por los *luchadores chilenos errantes*, una fracción numerosa de *luchadores latinoamericanos errantes*, entelequia compuesta de huérfanos que, como su nombre indica, erraban por el ancho mundo ofreciendo sus servicios al mejor postor, que casi siempre, por lo demás, era el peor” (217).
12. “la violencia de la que no podemos escapar. El destino de los latinoamericanos nacidos en la década de los cincuenta” (225).
13. “por todos los jóvenes que ya no eran jóvenes y por los jóvenes que murieron jóvenes, por los que lucharon por Salvador Allende y por los que tuvieron miedo de luchar por Salvador Allende” (228).
14. “[Mis textos] Son bastante optimistas, porque mis personajes no se suicidan, aguantan. Al menos no todos se suicidan” (Braithwaite 117).
15. “La violencia de U, sin embargo, lo lleva a sacar amargas conclusiones, pues U ha militado y tal vez aún milita en uno de los partidos de izquierda que B contemplaba, en aquella época, con más simpatía. La realidad, una vez más, le ha demostrado que la demagogia, el dogmatismo y la ignorancia no son patrimonio de ningún grupo concreto” (266).
16. “El once de septiembre fue para mí, además de un espectáculo sangriento, un espectáculo humorístico” (402).
17. “cuya sangre fría era sin duda equiparable a la imagen ideal del inglés que los chilenos desesperada y vanamente intentaron tener de sí mismos” (403).
18. “En México me contaron la historia de una muchacha del MIR a la que torturaron introduciéndole ratas vivas por la vagina. Esta muchacha pudo exiliarse y llegó al DF. Vivía allí, pero cada día estaba más triste y un día murió de tanta tristeza” (403).
19. “todos los que creyeron en el paraíso latinoamericano y murieron en el infierno latinoamericano. Pienso en esas obras que acaso permitan a la izquierda salir del foso de la vergüenza y la inoperancia” (406).
20. “El proyecto revolucionario, pues, era inseparable, para Bolaño, del proyecto artístico. Y el fracaso de uno conlleva el del otro” (“Bolaño internacional” 197).

21. “De todas formas, y pese a las desgracias colectivas y a las pequeñas desgracias personales, recuerdo lo días posteriores al golpe como días plenos, llenos de energía, llenos de erotismo, días y noches en los cuales todo podía suceder. No desearía, en modo alguno, que mi hijo tuviera que vivir unos veinte años como los que viví yo, pero también debo reconocer que mis veinte años fueron inolvidables. La experiencia del amor, del humor negro, de la amistad, de la prisión y del peligro de muerte se condensaron en menos de cinco meses interminables, que viví deslumbrado y aprisa” (53).
22. “a hacer la revolución” (195).
23. “La posibilidad de leer obras anteriores desde nuevos puntos de vista acaba por modificar la obra original, multiplicando hasta el infinito su potencial significativo” (106).
24. “concibo, de una manera muy humilde, la totalidad de mi obra en prosa e incluso alguna parte de mi poesía como un todo. Un todo no solo estilístico, sino también un todo argumental: los personajes están dialogando continuamente entre ellos y están apareciendo y desapareciendo” (Braithwaite 112).
25. “De la literatura chilena en el exilio yo diría, en primer término, que no es literatura, y en fecondo que tampoco es en el exilio. En rigor, no hay una literatura chilena en el exilio, y la que hay a mí me parece bastante mala” (Paz 60). Along these lines, in his interview with Swinburn, Bolaño expresses his disdain for denunciatory literature in general: “Because writing this way to end up having, for example, a novel of denunciation, well, it’s better not to write anything” (“Porque escribir sobre ese tema para que al final tengamos, por ejemplo, una novela de las llamadas de denuncia, bueno, mejor es no escribir nada” [75]). Corral has also underscored Bolaño’s rejection of this type of literature: “he sensed that . . . soaking his narrative with revolutionary tears lacking any historical and political insight was counterproductive as a structuring absence, and he knew that it would be going back to the type of engaged literature that he always rejected. And neither did he become anyone’s spokesperson” (“intuía que . . . empapar su narrativa de lágrimas revolucionarias carentes de perspicacia histórica y política era contraproducente como ausencia estructurante, y sabía que efectuarlo era volver al tipo de literatura comprometida que siempre rechazó. Tampoco se convirtió en portavoz de nadie” [99]).
26. “La literatura chilena, tan prestigiosa en Chile, no tiene más de cinco nombres válidos, eso hay que recordarlo como ejercicio crítico y autocrítico” (104). Incidentally, in this same essay, Bolaño adds a comment that could easily be considered sexist: “La literatura, supongo que ya quedado claro, no tiene nada que ver con premios nacionales sino más bien con una extraña lluvia de sangre, sudo, semen y lágrimas” (104). In another essay titled “La literatura chilena” (“Chilean

- Literature”), Bolaño affirms: “Chilean literature, I say to myself in my sleep, is an endless nightmare” (124) (“La literatura chilena, me digo en medio del sueño, . . . es una pesadilla sin vuelta atrás” [116]).
27. “el viaje iniciático de todos los pobres muchachos latinoamericanos, recorrer este continente absurdo” (195). In *Los sinsabores del verdadero policía*, we find the same reference to machismo: “Of longing for the conversation of my friends who took to the hills because they never grew up and they believed in a dream and because they were Latin American men, true macho men, and they died?” (85). And it is further questioned a few lines below: “Was their dream the dream of Neruda, of the Party bureaucrats, of the opportunists?” (85).
 28. “Arturito había cumplido y su conciencia, su terrible de machito latinoamericano, en teoría no tenía nada que reprocharse” (195).
 29. “se comportó como un hombre” (196).
 30. “En el caso de mi generación, bueno, nuestro valor fue tan grande como nuestra inocencia o estupidez. Digamos que, en esa épica, *lo que contaba era el gesto*. Mediante gestos uno construía su novela de aprendizaje, algo que bien mirado es bastante tonto y que a la postre, si las cosas hubieran sido diferentes, nos habría convertido en víctimas” (74, the italics are mine).
 31. “Sí, y me exhibía como malo, pero me da vergüenza contarlo. No robe ni violé, pero fui un joven violento. A los 19 años decidí que quería hacer la revolución” (80).
 32. “historias de amigos que habían muerto en las guerrillas de Latinoamérica” (411).
 33. “Estábamos un grupo de chilenos masoquistas reunidos para recordar la infausta fecha . . . De repente alguien, no sé quién, se puso a hablar del mal, del crimen que nos había cubierto con su enorme ala negra. ¡Hágame el favor! ¡Su enorme ala negra! ¡Los chilenos está visto que no aprendemos nunca!” (396–97).
 34. “Belano, le dije, el meollo de la cuestión es saber si el mal (o el delito o el crimen o como usted quiera llamarle) es casual o causal. Si es causal, podemos luchar contra él, es difícil de derrotar pero hay una posibilidad, más o menos como dos boxeadores del mismo peso. Si es casual, por el contrario, estamos jodidos. Que Dios, si existe, nos pille confesados. Y a eso se resume todo” (397).
 35. “En esas cosas se juntaba lo mejor y lo peor de Latinoamérica, los antiguos militantes y los violadores, los ex presos políticos y los despiadados comerciantes de bisutería” (412).
 36. “madre de la poesía joven de México” (38).
 37. “el viaje iniciático de todos los pobres muchachos latinoamericanos, recorrer este continente absurdo que entendemos mal o que de plano no entendemos” (63).
 38. “Cuando Arturo regresó a México, en enero de 1974, ya era otro. Allende había caído y él había cumplido con su deber, eso me lo

contó su hermana, Arturito había cumplido y su conciencia, su terrible conciencia de machito latinoamericano, en teoría no tenía nada que reprocharse” (66).

39. “tal vez Arturito ya esté muerto, pensé, tal vez este valle solitario sea la figuración del valle de la muerte, porque la muerte es el báculo de Latinoamérica y Latinoamérica no puede caminar sin su báculo” (67–68).
40. “para ellos Arturito ahora estaba instalado en la categoría de aquellos que han visto la muerte de cerca, en la subcategoría de los tipos duros, y eso, en la jerarquía de los machitos desesperados de Latinoamérica, era un diploma, un jardín de medallas indesdeñable” (71).
41. “Me dediqué a escribir con mi aura de veterano de guerra” (81).
42. “orné su retorno con colores tomados de la paleta de la poesía épica” (71).
43. “Y aunque el canto que escuché hablaba de la guerra, de las hazañas heroicas de una generación entera de jóvenes latinoamericanos sacrificados, yo supe que por encima de todo hablaba del valor y de los espejos, deseo y del placer. Y ese canto es nuestro amuleto” (154).
44. “Un oasis de horror en medio de un desierto de aburrimiento.”
45. “veterano de las guerras floridas y suicida en África” (11).
46. “el fantasma cada vez más vivo de Pierre Menard, la validez de muchos párrafos repetidos” (11).
47. “la lucha armada que nos iba a traer una nueva vida y una nueva época, pero que para la mayoría de nosotros era como un sueño o, más apropiadamente como la llave que nos abriría la puerta de los sueños, los únicos por los cuales merecía la pena vivir. Y aunque vagamente sabíamos que los sueños a menudo se convierten en pesadillas, eso no nos importaba” (13).
48. “Aparecía y desaparecía como un fantasma en todos los lugares donde había pelea, en todos los lugares en donde los latinoamericanos, desesperados, generosos, enloquecidos, valientes, aborrecibles, destruían y reconstruían y volvían a destruir la realidad en un intento último abocado al fracaso” (66).
49. “Se cuenta, en el triste folklore del exilio—en donde más de la mitad de las historias están falseadas o son sólo la sombra de la historia real—, que una noche otro chileno le dio una paliza de muerte” (75).
50. Y me fue imposible cerrar los ojos y no ver aquel espectáculo extraño, lento y extraño, aunque empotrado en una realidad velocísima:
miles de muchachos como yo, lampiños
o barbudos, pero latinoamericanos todos,
juntando sus mejillas con la muerte. (4)
51. Es 1976 y la Revolución ha sido derrotada
pero aún no lo sabemos.
Tenemos 22, 23 años.

...

Es 1976 y aunque todas las puertas parecen abiertas,
de hecho, si prestáramos atención, podríamos oír cómo una a una las
puertas se cierran. (56)

52. La revolución se llama Atlántida
Yes feroz e infinita
Mas no sirve para nada

...

Allí donde sólo se oyen las pisadas
De Parra
Y los sueños de generaciones
Sacrificadas bajo la rueda
Y no historiadas. (130)

53. "I dreamt I was dreaming, we'd lost the revolution before launching it and I decided to go home" (133).
54. "Soñé que estaba soñando y que en los túneles de los sueños encontraba el sueño de Roque Dalton: el sueño de los valientes que murieron por una quimera de mierda" (156).
55. "Soñé que los soñadores habían ido a la Guerra florida. Nadie había regresado. En los tabloncitos de cuarteles olvidados en las montañas alcancé a leer algunos nombres. Desde un lugar remoto una voz transmitía una y otra vez las consignas por las que ellos se habían condenado" (166).
56. "las intenciones de éste, por supuesto, difieren de las de Toynbee. El profesor británico en última instancia trabaja para que el crimen y la ignominia no caigan en el olvido. El novelista virginiano por momentos parece creer que en algún lugar 'del tiempo y del espacio' aquel crimen se ha asentado victorioso y procede, por tanto, a inventarlo" (131).
57. "Yo que predije la caída de Allende y que sin embargo no tomé ninguna medida al respecto...yo que seguí manteniendo los lazos con grupos de izquierda, una galería de románticos (o de modernistas), pistoleros, psicópatas, dogmáticos e imbéciles, todos sin embargo valientes, ¿pero de qué sirve la valentía?, ¿hasta cuándo hemos de seguir siendo valientes" (43). Some of these phrases are later repeated in the fifth chapter (196).
58. "estar en la disidencia en un país civilizado" (45).
59. "se trata de materiales destinados a un proyecto de novela finalmente aparcado, algunas de cuyas líneas narrativas condujeron hacia 2666, mientras otras quedaron en suspenso, inservibles o pendientes de ser retomadas por el autor" ("Bolaño. Penúltimos" n.p.).
60. Paradoxically, Bolaño declared, in an interview with Carmen Boullosa, his admiration for the struggle against melancholy: "I'm interested in...[Pascal's] struggle against melancholy, which to me seems more admirable now than ever before" (63).

61. “Casi todos los libros de B. son ferozmente melancólicos (ferocidad y melancolía, a un tiempo). Tanto que bordean peligrosamente el sentimentalismo—todo lo bordea peligrosamente, B.—, y luego entran de lleno en él. Y luego ‘se ahogan’ en esa melancolía y luego salen más bien fortalecidos, casi invulnerables. ¿Cómo diablos lo hacía B.?” (103).
62. In *El secreto del mal* (*The Secret of Evil*, 2007), Bolaño connects this desire for respectability with the origin of the new Latin American literature: “It comes from the terrible (and in a certain way fairly understandable) fear of working in an office and selling cheap trash on the Paseo Ahumada. It comes from the desire for respectability, which is simply a cover for fear” (140). (“Viene del miedo. Viene del horrible [y en cierta forma bastante comprensible] miedo de trabajar en una oficina o vendiendo baratijas en el Paseo Ahumada. Viene del deseo de respetabilidad, que sólo encubre el miedo” [177]).
63. “la novela intenta reflejar una cierta derrota generacional y también la felicidad de una generación, felicidad que en ocasiones fue el valor y los límites del valor” (327).

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Part II
Two Major Novels



Chapter 3

666 Twinned and Told Twice: Roberto Bolaño's Double Time Frame in 2666

Margaret Boe Birns

The number 2666 never appears in any of the five sections of the novel titled *2666*. Roberto Bolaño's executor, Ignacio Echevarría, offered one interpretative suggestion when, in the afterword to the novel, he calls the title "a vanishing point around which the different parts of the novel fall into place," which indicates a "hidden center" (896). It could be that the point of convergence Echevarría posits is the literal year 2666, though the novel is not set in the year 2666 and is not about the future. But if this is a reference to the literal year, perhaps the message is that the novel's hidden center may only be found by future readers—that his enigmatic narrative will finally be understood in, roughly, 650 years.

Another popular interpretation of the novel's title is that 2666 is the last year, the last thing, the final point at which all vanishes, all is forgotten. This seems to be the meaning of the number as it is invoked in Bolaño's novel *Amulet*, which describes the state of Guerrero, as

more like a cemetery than an avenue, not a cemetery in 1974 or in 1968, or 1975, but a cemetery in the year 2666, a forgotten cemetery under the eyelid of a corpse or an unborn child, bathed in the dispassionate fluids of an eye that tried so hard to forget one particular thing that it ended up forgetting everything else. (86)

This interpretation can also suggest a Judgment Day or apocalypse—the 666 in 2666 easily calls to mind the triple sixes associated with an apocalyptic, world-historical crisis.

The original invocation of 666, that is, the number of the beast, first mentioned in the Book of Revelations, subsequently passes into

the popular imagination as a code word for a supernatural or spiritual evil. But 666 also references the future—the number is deployed in the context of a future world-ending cataclysm imaged as a great beast, whose name can be translated numerically into three sixes. This apocalypse is however undated and can be assigned either to some indefinite future or to the day after tomorrow or, indeed, to this very day—and that sense of 2666 as a here-and-now possibility is very much present in Bolaño's novel. The year 2666 can be said to have already folded itself into the twentieth century, as a minor character in the Mexican section of the novel suggests: "Every single thing in this country is an homage to everything in the world, even the things that haven't happened yet" (339). This connection between the here-and-now and 2666 was, in fact, first suggested by Bolaño himself in *Amulet*, in which Guerrero seems to magically morph into a cemetery in the year 2666 as if, in other words, this Mexican state is already dead, or, perhaps, undead. As Grant Farred has suggested in his important article on the novel, the scene of death in 2666 is not localized, but seems to be everywhere. But there are, in particular, two scenes of death in 2666—as Farred puts it, the novel constructs a legacy or lineage between two epochs. That image of death first evoked as a cemetery in 2666 is twinned in two epochs that mirror each other in their depiction of death, the undead, and death-as-atrocity, as crime. In 2666's narrative, the rough beast of Revelations can be said to have already arrived twice—the title can suggest two instances of the manifestation of the catastrophic number of the beast: the 1940s in Nazi Germany, and then resurfacing in an uncanny and cryptic way in Mexico in the 1990s.

The two time frames literally converge in only one character in the novel, but this enigmatic character is himself twice born, once as the young ex-Nazi soldier Hans Reiter, then finding a second life as the author Benno von Archimboldi, who late in life undertakes an ambiguous mission to Santa Teresa in northern Mexico. Only Reiter/Archimboldi is present in the two eras, and if the title suggests each era endured a visit by this ancient symbol of evil, the first deployment of 666 is in the narrative concerned with Nazi Germany and the figure of Reiter; the second deployment, however, is in a completely different time and place, the 1990s in Mexico, reflecting the rise of neoliberal global capitalism, in which Reiter morphs into the elusive figure of Archimboldi.

But this reality is withheld from the reader until the fifth and final part of the novel, since the correlation between the two time frames is not made clear until the true identity of Archimboldi is

disclosed. Even then, some of the correlations between the two eras can be occult or subtle even as we understand that Archimboldi's extension across the two epochs is crucial to the novel's purpose. In Part One of the five parts, however, we only know that a group of critics in Europe are obsessed with Archimboldi. That this writer will eventually be revealed as Hans Reiter, a German soldier in the Nazi army who spent most of the war years on the Eastern front, will only be revealed in the very last section of the novel, "The Part about Archimboldi." Part One, "The Part about the Critics," then, positions us within an almost Sebaldian sense of historical opacity—none of the critics in the neoliberalized Europe of the 1990s demonstrate any awareness of the recent totalitarianisms that pushed Europe into crisis.¹

The story of Archimboldi is the only strand of the novel that returns the reader to Nazi Germany. As is true of the other parts of the novel, the story of the young Archimboldi's identity as the Nazi soldier Hans Reiter works within the conventions of realism, but also flirts with the fantastic, what Sharae Deckard in her article on *2666* refers to as the "irreal" within the aesthetics of realism. For instance, Hans is deployed as one of the soldiers attending a Nazi-allied Rumanian General, as he relaxes in an old Gothic castle said to have originally belonged to Dracula, a supernatural figure associated with violent predation and very often with a vampiric form of sexuality. Dracula not only comes under discussion in the castle, but he seems to haunt it—the spirit of Dracula is suggested in an episode in the castle depicting bloodied sex between the Rumanian General and one of his guests, the Baroness von Zumpe, who seems to morph from sexual partner into his victim. The violent sexual scene mysteriously echoes episodes in the previous chapter, "The Part about the Crimes," which takes place in Santa Teresa, Mexico. This penultimate chapter, which catalogues numerous violent, sexual attacks on women in Santa Teresa, is here mirrored in the General's brutal, vampiric sexual encounter with the Baroness, and can be said to be, for the voyeur Hans, a revelatory trope for the regime in whose troops he is a soldier. Also insinuated into Hans's tenure in the castle are references to Dracula as a serial killer who used strangulation as one of his methods—a seemingly offhand detail that can, even beneath the level of conscious notice, direct us back to the many deaths of women by strangulation in Santa Teresa. The image of Dracula as a serial killer also recurs in Santa Teresa: there is a man sitting in jail in Santa Teresa who is suspected of being a serial killer responsible for the deaths of many of the murdered women in that city.

The supernatural Dracula surfaces in both of the novel's time frames, but later Reiter meets a mid-level Polish administrator whose story also establishes a different kind of correlation with the murders of the women in Santa Teresa. This character, Leo Sammer, is not a serial killer, but a mass murderer. His identity as a murderer, however, is not one that involves his own individual agency and does not evoke the cryptic or the uncanny. The murders he commits are tasks performed as part of his job and engage nothing in the way of sexual impulses or ideations. When a train carrying five hundred Jews appears in his section of occupied Poland, Sammer is ordered to dispose of them. But he does not do this himself; instead, the task becomes a collective project, whose delegation to others is simply part of his job as an administrator: he outsources the chore to policemen, firemen, and, most notably, Polish street kids, who take the prisoners a few at a time into the woods and shoot them. Sammer is determined to assimilate these crimes into the ordinary business of his day. The occult aura of Dracula's castle utterly dissolves—the prosaic evil of Leo Sammer suggests instead the bureaucratic banality identified by Hannah Arendt in her classic report on the trail of Adolf Eichmann in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Sammer says:

I was a fair administrator. I did good things, guided by my instincts, and bad things, driven by the vicissitudes of war. But now the drunken Polish boys will open their mouths and say I ruined their childhoods, said Sammer to Reiter. Me? I ruined their childhoods? Liquor ruined their childhoods! Soccer ruined their childhoods! Those lazy, shiftless mothers ruined their childhoods! Not me. (2666 767)

And after a pause, he continues: "Anyone else in my place," said Sammer to Reiter, "would have killed all the Jews with their own hands. I didn't. It isn't in my nature" (767).

This alternative image of evil turns from the underworldly black magic of Dracula to the historical reality of the Holocaust, so that we move from the specific occult, spiritual evil of Dracula to a field of systemic evil for which no single entity can be said to suffice as an explanation. Sammer is sensitive to the accusation that he has especially damaged the Polish boys to whom he assigned some of these murders, but feels he bears no actual responsibility for something that was required by the system he served. This image of genocide, placed in the final chapter, can be said to build a picture of the Nazi era that interprets the previous part about the crimes in the 1990s. But although Grant Farred articulates this narrative strategy when he notes that "for Bolaño it is only through genocide that the

maquiladora deaths can be properly understood in their analogical relation to the history of large-scale violent death that preceded it” (706), Bolaño’s reference to genocide is sensitively scaled and measured, consisting only of the episode in which Leo Sammer arranges for the murder of the trainload of Polish Jews.

There is, however, perhaps a more comprehensive analogical relation in terms of the presentation of Leo Sammer’s crime. Sammer works to distance himself from what happened by means of a dutiful civil servant perspective that assumes moral neutrality and valorizes expertise and efficiency. This perspective finds an equivalence in police reports of the previous book, “The Part about the Crimes.” Beginning with the description of the dead body of a 13-year-old girl and ending with the body of the 108th murder victim, the reports suggest an emotional poverty reminiscent of Sammer’s previous banal bureaucratic mindset. The method of narrating these seemingly endless series of deaths, presented as a dull, flat record of liquidation, finds an echo in Sammer’s effort to treat his crimes in a similar impersonal, routinized manner.

That the killings of the women are incorporated into some larger systemic process may account for the desultory investigation of the crimes. The moral neutrality of the language becomes, then, a kind of silence and amounts to a policy of indifference that shapes itself into an official position that protects the wrongdoers or the conditions that makes the crimes possible. Certainly, Bolaño is asking us to consider under what conditions the underprivileged working women of Santa Teresa become corpses, while the rest of the city takes on as aspect of zombie-like figures who, whether through fear or indifference, fail to come alive in response to the alarming series of murders. Bolaño suggests that a loss of agency and affect on the part of the bystanders amounts to a parallel phenomena not of physical murder, but of soul murder. That a population can turn away from the presence of epidemic and ultimately systemic murder is mirrored in the final chapter, in which an old man reflects on the Holocaust:

Now we sob and moan and say we didn’t know! We had no idea! It was the Nazis! We never would have done such a thing! We know how to whimper. We know how to drum up sympathy. We don’t care whether we’re mocked so long as they pity us and forgive us. There’ll be plenty of time to embark on a long holiday of forgetting. (784)

The long holiday of forgetting may remind us of the opening of the novel, in which four literary critics do indeed appear to be on a long

holiday, even as they are almost immediately evolving into detectives determined to uncover realities they feel have been hidden from them and which reach beyond the identity of the elusive Archimboldi. Perhaps these realities also count on their passivity, unknowingness, or Sebaldian forgetfulness.

In his piece on *2666*, Erick Lyle finds that “The Part about the Crimes” references not only the era of Nazi Germany, but also the disappearances in Chile and in Argentina in the 1970s. Describing the maquiladoras as not unlike the torture cells in Buenos Aires, Lyle notes that Bolaño names one of the factories EMSA after the Argentine concentration camp and uses El Chile as the name of the garbage dump where many of the bodies have been discovered. Lyle also points out that as the murders are subjected to mechanized and routinized reports, there is a parallel increasing apprehension that there exists behind it all a powerful juggernaut reminiscent of totalitarian dictatorships. Indeed, in the novel’s final chapter a correlation is established with the most infamous of totalitarian dictatorships. “The Part about the Crimes,” however, does not take place in the context of an authoritarian state, but instead is rooted in the global capitalism that developed after the fall of the Soviet Union, and which Lyle suggests found an early expression in 1970s Chile. From a neoliberal perspective, in fact, Santa Teresa is something of an economic miracle. Ciudad Juárez, the city on which Santa Teresa was modeled, was chosen by the *Financial Times* in 2008, for instance, as “the City of the Future,” a shining example of what neoliberalism accomplishes. But this celebratory tone is muted and ironized in *2666*; for example, the American journalist Oscar Fate is told that Santa Teresa is “a big city, a real city. We have everything. Factories, maquiladoras, one of the lowest unemployment rates in Mexico, a cocaine cartel, a constant flow of workers” (286). What is represented here is an economy with new industries but also with a powerful underworld. And we learn that the flow of workers is both feminized and subject to violence: the victims in Santa Teresa are always women, and almost always working-class women often associated with the maquiladoras, developed as a consequence of the ascendancy of neoliberal global capitalism. Both the reader and one of the investigators in the novel are provided this insight by a woman he has called in to question:

But she was tired, which irritated Sergio and made him say, in exasperation, that in Santa Teresa they were killing whores, so why not show a little professional solidarity, to which the whore replied that he was wrong, in the story has he had told it the women dying were factory

workers, not whores. Workers, workers, she said. And then Sergio, as if a lightbulb had gone on over his head, he glimpsed an aspect of the situation that until now he'd overlooked. (466)

That maquiladoras preferentially employ women is not an anomaly but speaks to the way in which neoliberalism led to the increasing feminization of factory labor drawn not simply locally but from migrants all over Mexico. In contradistinction to the often pseudoempowering rhetoric of contemporary feminism, however, the women who work in the maquiladoras are poor and compliant. Their defenselessness is suggested by their sole travel option home after work: a long walk alone in the dark.

Yet the relentless, flat affect of the narrative tone, the deadening cumulative power of the mounting murders, and the general passivity of community response all serve to turn the reader away from any expectation that "The Part about the Crimes" will shape itself into a crime novel with a solution as its outcome. Instead, the narrative points not only to the crimes but also to the conditions under which working-class women are made vulnerable and disposable. A general aura of passivity/complicity in Santa Teresa directs us to the corrupt politicians, policemen, businessman, or drug lords who, it is suggested, have accepted the disposability of these women as a component of the economic system: it is evident that they have no interest in protecting these women and their interests may lie in discouraging any investigation of the crimes. The depiction of the power structure in Santa Teresa does not obviously separate the categories of police, businessman, and criminal, which are instead enmeshed and intertwined. It is as if business and crime cannot be distinguished; that Santa Teresa's prosperity is a product of both the rackets (especially drugs) and the manufacturing industry, each reliant on the American consumer, and both producing millionaire businessmen with empires to protect. As a former chief of police in the novel suggests, "evil is like a Ferrari" (536) on Mexico's new highways of freedom, which suggests that evil is not only like a Ferrari, but very likely drives one. As Jean and John Comaroff have noted, the rise of organized crime emulated the business enterprises of the day, especially the drive to accumulate huge fortunes with as few labor costs as possible. In his narrative, Bolaño will introduce the presence of black Peregrino sedans, as sinister as they are banal, as just such an indeterminate representation of crime and/or legitimate business.

What happens to the women is the result of something indirect, something larger; as it was Leo Sammer who licensed the Polish boys

to murder Jews in the woods, the implication is that there is a similar systemic license given to the murderer—or gang of murderers—in Santa Teresa. The radical suggestion is that the crimes are not accidental or deviant, but that, on the contrary, the brutality and degradation are consequences of an entire social and economic order. As contrasted to Claudio Lomnitz's postulation in *Death and the Idea of Mexico*, that death is a permanent dark spiritual substrate in Mexican identity, in Bolaño's Santa Teresa the deaths are an epiphenomenon of neoliberalism and the mirror of fascist evil. The indifference and ineptitude of the police, then, take place within a larger societal context whose continued success requires or permits a climate of impunity for the murderers of the women. And although the police are civil servants responsible for the arrest of the man or men who committed these crimes against women, there is a famously long passage in which various members of the police force share misogynistic jokes, introducing another feature of the conditions under which these crimes are possible, namely, a categorical hostility to anyone who is a woman, specifically or generally. Misogyny is indicated not only by the brutality and, often, sexual nature of the crimes against the women, but is also present in the series of jokes told by the police, which seem to go on for a very long time, linking them analogically with the long string of crimes against women in Santa Teresa. These jokes suggest that the killings of the women were less personal than ideological or conditioned by prejudice. The neologism "femicide," in fact, came into use and was inspired by the murders of women in Ciudad Juárez. "Femicide" connotes not simply the murder of women, but a general indifference to the murder of underprivileged, marginalized women, or, even, a tacit decision to permit these crimes as acceptable, or inevitable. Although Bolaño does not literally use the word "femicide" in his novel, the relentless way in which he strings together crime upon crime builds into a sense of mass slaughter, returning us inferentially to Leo Sammer's genocide.

The character of Elvira Campos, the director of a local mental institution, further develops this idea of femicide by suggesting that the most dominant fear in Mexico is gynophobia (fear of women) and sacraphobia (fear of the sacred), and that these two fears are one and the same. But while fear or hatred of the sacred may be manifest in attacks on the women of Santa Teresa, as if on the sacred figure of the town's namesake Santa Teresa herself, more often any sense of the sacred is simply diminished or has ceased to exist in the city. When the American Oscar Fate considers the sacred, for instance, he imagines tiny toy churches abandoned in kind of abyss or contrasts

the apprehension of the sacred with his actual reality: munching a taco in a sleazy Mexican café that he suspects is providing him with a foretaste of hell.

Fate is a resonant character whose identity as an American is yet another way *Bolaño* implicates the United States in what is happening in Santa Teresa. As an African American, Fate himself references a history of disenfranchisement, disposability, and exploitation that is a significant part of American history; but, ironically, although Fate would like to publish an article about the feminists of Santa Teresa protesting outside a police station, his editor in Harlem does not feel that Latina women really merit much interest to his readers. Fate himself, however, refuses to accept this kind of dissociation from the crimes against the women, and it may in fact be his African American identity that is permitting him to become increasingly sensitized to the issue. As he contemplates the attacks on women, he begins to wonder if these attacks are not perceived as acceptable violence, similar to that of a boxing match he attends; or similar to the acceptable violence against blacks in the United States. As Fate develops greater sensitivity and vigilance, he especially fears for the safety of Professor Amalfitano's daughter Rosa—but as he spirits the young woman to safety, we observe her father, Amalfitano, leaning against one of those sinister black Peregrino sedans, chatting amicably with its driver after having just denied any previous acquaintance. The meaning of this sighting is left undetermined in its specifics, but in general this is yet another indication that Fate is beginning to detect previously unimagined or hidden connections between the crimes against the women and other parts of the forest that seemed free of any complicity. Fate's investigation, however, does not concentrate on Professor Amalfitano (whose situation with the driver of the Peregrino is never made clear) or on others in the city, but on the enmeshment of America itself in the menacing world of narcos, pornographers, maquiladoras, and the female workers in Santa Teresa. As both an African American and an American, he references both the situation of the victims and those associated with the conditions for exploitation of the victims. Fate is surprised to find that he identifies himself simply as an "American" in Mexico and understands that in crossing the border he is no longer perceived as a member of a vulnerable minority, but as a citizen of a very powerful and entitled country. At the same time, his identity as an African American tells a story that has correspondences with the story we will read in "The Part about the Crimes."

As was true of Fate's mood itself, the deepening mood in *2666* is not that of the sacred, but of the profane, suggested most cogently by

the murders and by references to pornographic filmmaking in Santa Teresa, especially the possibility of snuff films² that return us to the murders in a roundabout way. One small thread of the novel concerns another American, Kelly Rivera Parker, who is said to have run an upmarket prostitution ring but who has now disappeared. This cold case adds itself to the profane situation of women in Santa Teresa and indicates another neoliberal phenomenon, namely, the global sex trade, capitalizing on a standing reserve of expendable female labor.³

The rumors of a porn/snuff film industry in Santa Teresa and the sexual violence of the murders can find muted reverberation or correlation in the subsequent section, in which Reiter observes an episode of sexual violence in the castle that legend has it belonged to Dracula. The specter of Dracula is first raised in “The Part about the Crimes” before returning in “The Part about Archimboldi,” but there are many other images that, like the figure of Dracula, introduce something strange and uncanny into the landscape of Santa Teresa. For instance, early in the novel the entire city of Santa Teresa, like the taco joint within its city limits, is described as hellish, with sunsets that resemble a carnivorous flower and whose population of birds is largely black vultures, a description that indicates a sense of spiritual evil. In fact, one character in the novel suggests it is some large dark cosmic force that has mysteriously descended on Santa Teresa.

This imagery of underlying, pervasive evil, the suspicion that hidden, horrible, and metaphysical evil resides in Santa Teresa suggests that what happens in the city defies logical explanation—as one police inspector concludes in “The Part about the Crimes,” “It’s fucked up, that’s the only explanation” (561). All of Santa Teresa appears increasingly on the edge of the abyss or the edge of collapse; in his part of the novel, for instance, Professor Amalfitano notices that even a butterfly’s shadow looks “like a hastily dug pit that gives off an alarming stench” (220). And, interestingly, the visiting European literary critics liken Amalfitano’s maddening situation in Santa Teresa to an old man put out to pasture on “a capricious and childish beast that would have swallowed Heidegger in a single gulp if Heidegger had had the bad luck to be born on the Mexican-U.S. border” (114), an image that anticipates the final chapter of the novel, and makes subtle allusion to the apocalyptic beast whose number figures in the novel’s title.

The one single image that most intensely unites the two time frames, however, and which most intensely demonstrates the loss of the sacred is that of the abyss, already suggested earlier by Amalfitano’s vision of the butterfly’s shadow. In the final chapter, Reiter and his fellow soldiers also experience a sense of the abyss; while frequenting

the cafes, they would suddenly seem to freeze, lose all sense of time, and turn completely inward, as if they were bypassing the abyss of daily life, the abyss of people, the abyss of conversation, and decided to approach a kind of lakeside region, a late-romantic region, where the borders were clocked from dusk to dusk, 10, 15, 20 minutes, and eternity, like the minutes of those condemned to die, like the minutes of women who've just given birth and are condemned to die, who understand that more time isn't more eternity and nevertheless wish with all their souls for more time, and their wails are birds that come flying every so often across the double lakeside landscape, so calmly, like luxurious excrescences or heartbeats. Then, naturally, the three men would emerge stiff from the silence and go back to talking about inventions, women, Finnish philology, the building of highways across the Reich (663–64).

Similarly, the notebooks of the Russian Jew Boris Ansky, which so profoundly affected Reiter when he read them in the 1940s, introduce him to various images of the abyss. Ansky's notebooks bring to Reiter what can be called a central theme of *2666*, namely, the recognition of an abyss of violence, loss, death, and pain in Reiter's era, and its recurrence in Mexico at the end of the century. This recognition is also found earlier in the book, but later in time. Another Russian, Boris Yeltsin, appears to Amalfitano in a dream in the 1990s:

And he said: listen carefully to what I have to say, comrade. I'm going to explain what the third leg of the human table is. I'm going to tell you. And then leave me alone. Life is demand and 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. (228)

Yeltsin references the abyss that opens up when life is reduced to the economic condition described as the law of supply and demand, which does not come out of the traumatic war and the totalitarian governments experienced by Ansky and Reiter; Yeltsin's abyss became manifest when he replaced the last Soviet leader, Gorbachev, prompting free market reforms that initially were greeted with some of the utopian expectations that saw the rise of socialism in the country at the beginning of the century, but which produced, as in the earlier era, intimations of the abyss.

Even earlier, but also in the 1990s time frame, the critic Morini suffers from a nightmare in which an ordinary hotel pool becomes an

abyss a thousand feet wide and two miles long. In fact, all the critics feel that, in Santa Teresa, they are standing at the edge of a deep void. The morally chaotic abyss of Morini is one that also engages the most disturbing aspects of the novel's first chapter, "The Part about the Critics," and links them to the crisis in Santa Teresa. Bolaño depicts a number of disturbing incidents in contemporary Europe that draw a seemingly cosmopolitan and enlightened continent—with its cultured literary critics—into the succeeding chapters that largely take place either in Mexico or in Nazi Germany. Included in the violent incidents in this European part is the racist beating of a Pakistani cab driver, an episode that can especially correspond to the misogyny in Santa Teresa. And then there is the strange story of Edward Johns, an English painter who cuts off his hand because, Morini assumes, "he believed in investments, the flow of capital, one has to play the game to win, that kind of thing" (97). This suggestion speaks to a neoliberal paradigm that will reverberate throughout the novel and especially find brutal expression in Santa Teresa. And, interestingly, the abyss into which Morini fears he and the others will fall actually does become the fate of Johns: "He drew the waterfall, the mountains, the outcroppings of rock, the forest, and the nurse reading her book, far away from it all. Then the accident happened. Johns stood up on the rock and slipped, and although the man tried to catch him, he fell into the abyss" (150).

While Morini and the other critics wander off the pages of the novel after their part in the story, that image of them on the edge of an abyss finds significant correlation in Ansky's notebooks in the last section of the novel; his writing describes a feeling that he and his friends are on the edge of the abyss and, as was true of the critics years later, it is only their love affairs that seem to keep them from the bottomless pit.

Reiter's nephew, Klaus Haas, currently in prison in Santa Teresa as a serial killer responsible for at least some of the crimes against women in Santa Teresa, dreams he too is on the edge of an abyss. Haas is also suspected of being "The Penitent," a nickname the police assign to a man whose crimes consist of the desecration of churches and attacks on church caretakers. This figure of The Penitent is what inspired Elvira Campos to speculate on scraphobia, and also prompted one of the detectives to link The Penitent with Dracula, who in the popular imagination famously loathes the sacred, most specifically the crucifix. This conversation about The Penitent anticipates the subsequent chapter's episode in Dracula's castle and more closely associates the figure of Haas with the Nazi epoch depicted in the next chapter. As

the nephew of Reiter/Archiboldi, Klaus Haas literally draws a connection between Santa Teresa in the 1990s and Nazi Germany; and in a low-key way, he is a double for Reiter: his mother Lotte, Reiter's beloved little sister, for instance, at one point imagines her brother as a giant—and, in reality, her son is a blond giant.⁴ And just as Haas invokes imagery of the abyss, his lawyer, Isabel Santolaya, imagines herself and Haas alone in a crater “and in the crater there would be only silence and the vague presence of the lawyer and Haas, chained in the depths” (591). The interlinking of Haas with the sacrilegious penitent and by inference with Dracula also connects him to the penitential abyss that one of an SS Officer in Dracula's castle associates with Dracula; in a debate over the national origins of Dracula, the SS Officer claims him for Germany, but also describes him as having a life abroad, which “had been a constant dizzying spin, a constant abysmal penitence” (685).

In the “Part about Archiboldi,” which is largely about the Nazi epoch, Boris Ansky not only envisions the abyss, but also returns us to that sense of the fantastic linked to not only Dracula but to all the earlier references to telepathic communication and meaningful dreams. Although Ansky has died, he begins to appear in Reiter's dreams, and in his notebook touches on the concept of extraterrestrials, associated not only with his compatriot Ivanov, but also elsewhere with Haas and Reiter. While Bolaño is not considered a surrealist or a fantasy writer, he also does not rule out perspectives found in horror/gothic/science-fiction/fantasy—in a late interview with Carmen Boullosa, Bolaño can be said to cast some light on this layer of his narrative by expressing his admiration for Philip K. Dick, whose work he admitted he would like to emulate—but not because Dick is fantastic, but because his depiction of the fantastic seemed to Bolaño more and more realistic: fantasy as a way of seeing, a mode of perception.

This way of seeing is built into Reiter's new name, adapted from that of Renaissance artist Guiseppe Arcimboldo, whose paintings of the four seasons demonstrate the mingling of the human and the vegetable within the human face, inspiring Reiter to take as his own aesthetic Ansky's interpretation of the artwork: “everything in everything” (734). The narrative strategy here is not, then, so much analogy as literal parallels, as if the evil of one era has somehow traveled through time and emerged in a completely different era, but nevertheless a compatible or hospitable one. It is a historical reinstatement of the spirit of evil in both its banal and bureaucratic forms and as an irreal metaphysical presence that both makes the ground shift beneath the feet of those who detect it and provides an explanation

competitive with a conventionally realistic perspective. And in its most popular iconic form, that alternative irreality is suggested by the number in the title.

The situating of Archimboldi in Santa Teresa, however, is ambiguous—the critics sense that he is already in the city, but at the end of the novel his arrival is anticipated, but not realized. Archimboldi seems magnetically drawn to Santa Teresa, as if the evil he had willed himself to forget has surfaced 50 years later in another time, in another type of society. Archimboldi has been sent by his sister on a mission to rescue his nephew, and Klaus himself is certain that someone will come to save him. Can this someone be Archimboldi? Haas threatens: “But someone worse than me and worse than the killer is coming to this motherfucking city. Do you hear his footsteps getting closer? Do you?” (506). This hardly sounds like the humanistic Archimboldi, but instead suggests that rough slouching beast of Yeats’ “Second Coming,” that is, the death-driven beast of Revelations, called down and made manifest by the conditions in Santa Teresa. Interestingly, the novel’s final paragraph presents us with a double vision, evoking both a season of cheer and an image of the abyss:

Both this case and the previous case were closed after three days of generally halfhearted investigations. The Christmas holidays in Santa Teresa were celebrated in the usual fashion. There were posadas, piñatas were smashed, tequila and beer were drunk. Even on the poorest streets people could be heard laughing. Some of these streets were completely dark, like black holes, and the laughter that came from who knows where was the only sign, the only sign, the only beacon that kept residents and stranger from getting lost. (933)

The conclusion of this novel does not give us a solution to either the crimes or the mystery of Archimboldi, despite the quest motif set up by the critics. Instead of a linear quest, the novel has constructed a network or web of conditions and situations to such an extent that what Reiter/Archimboldi will do next matters less than the dual motif or doubling—he is coming to the second abyss, the second crisis of his life, this time coming in old age, rather than in youth. The larger point is that what Grant Farred described as “the DNA” (690) of the Nazi epoch is somehow replicated in the 1990s in Santa Teresa and as such is drawing Reiter back into its vortices.

The reference to the abyss at the end, and all the earlier references to it, asks us to consider whether (as psychic Florita Almada concludes in “The Part about the Crimes”) all effort leads inevitably to a vast

abyss, in which, as the voice of Amalfitano's grandfather suggests, everything lets us down. The imagery of the abyss speaks to one of Bolaño's major concerns, namely, the way in which politically progressive high hopes end in tears, giving rise to the kind of despair expressed by the old "essayist" who tells Archimboldi very late in the novel that "everything collapses in the end . . . everything collapses in pain" (858). The final paragraph can then speak to our fear that Archimboldi himself will be drawn into this malevolent black hole, that he is doomed as darkness and desolation descend on a broken city.

The laughter coming from the abyss, however, acts as a kind of beacon, affirming another layer of *2666* not dissimilar to that found in the novels of Philip K. Dick, the novelist Bolaño praised near the end of his life. As Ursula K. Le Guin noted in her essay on Dick in *The New Republic*, there were always heroes in his novels, ordinary people who remained honest and kind even within a crisis. And by the end of the fourth book in *2666*, there are also some ordinary people who almost can be said to be an improvised and tentative team: Sergio González and Oscar Fate, arts reporters turned crime reporters; Lalo Cura, the "loco" rookie on the Santa Teresa police force; and Congresswoman Azucena Esquivel Plata and the mystic seer Florita Almada. That the members of this loosely organized grouping include empowered women is significant, speaking not only to the gender of the victims but also to a crisis in feminism, what Nancy Fraser has described as a kind of historical twist of fate by which the feminist movement began to legitimate neoliberalism. The reality of feminism, then, is a two-tier world in which some women, as Marc Bousquet points out, can rise professionally, while other women are left with low-paying jobs in the service industry or in factories. Bousquet suggests feminism after its revolutionary beginnings is now characterized by trauma and mourning and is no longer a mode of opposition, resistance, or change. Indeed, the over one hundred murdered women in "The Part about the Crimes" indicate not feminism rampant or triumphant, but instead a site of trauma and mourning. But that there are successful women who have responded to the crimes in a way that suggests agency and resistance is important in a novel that becomes progressively darker, seeming to obliterate any alternatives to the waiting lightless abyss. Bolaño does, however, include in his narrative a measure of resistance, a crucial element in *2666*, even as it must be distinguished from the perspective of, say, Amalfitano's ghostly grandfather, who, after depicting the triumph of the abyss, tells his grandson to "cheer up, it's fun in the end" (198). The ending

of *2666*, on the other hand, does not give us much in the way of fun. As Farred points out, the profane, corrupt, and amoral world of Santa Teresa does not resolve into the restorative, or the redemptive. As in Václav Havel's belief that evil haunts the place where it was done and can never be undone, the crimes in both epochs of the novel cannot be wished away or dialectically surpassed. The reverberating dark-nesses of *2666* must stand without a trivializing absolution or acquit-tal. So although Bolaño does treat Archimboldi to an ice cream at the end of the novel, it is clear that he is on his way to a fresh hell in which the crimes against the women of Santa Teresa contain, as Klaus Hass says, the dark secret of the world itself.

That Archimboldi has not arrived in Santa Teresa and that none of the novel's mysteries have been settled allow Bolaño to maintain an open horizon. As Bolaño notes in his essay on lost writers, it is from neoliberalism's perspective that everything is lost; instead, Bolaño expresses his admiration for "those who refuse to come in out of the storm" (*Between Parentheses* 86). Interestingly, the deaths of these lost writers are described as "great suicides" whose choices echo that of Bolaño himself, who is said to have refused crucial surgery in order to stay within his creative vortex and finish *2666*, and perhaps one can call Archimboldi a similar lost writer. If so, it follows that our strange hero's only hope requires that he head deliberately into the eye of a storm that, for all its sense of being shiny and new, seems to be bring-ing the world once again back to the abyss.

Notes

1. Similarly, the critics demonstrate little understanding of those aspects of their own historical moment—until they go to Santa Teresa in search of Archimboldi. Santa Teresa and what it represents is an unknown quantity.
2. A snuff film is a type of pornography featuring the actual murder of a participating actor or actors.
3. Another recent novel, *Purge*, by the Finnish author Sofi Oksanen, examines the global sex industry within a context of a neoliberalism that offers itself as an alternative to the Soviet totalitarianism but that, in its capacity for ruthlessness and exploitation, becomes its mirror.
4. Other doublings for Reiter: like Dracula or many of the Santa Teresa murderers, Reiter himself has become a strangler when he murders Leo Sammer. Additionally, rumors of violent encounters with prosti-tutes follow Reiter/Archimboldi, and he is also often sighted wearing a leather jacket said to have belonged to a member of the Gestapo. Like Sammer, Reiter also changes his name and allows his earlier identity to disintegrate. This teasing, ambiguous, unstable, deliberately antiheroic presentation of Archimboldi begins in the first book—for instance,

in this passage about the critic Liz Norton: “And something strange was going on even with Archimboldi and everything Archimboldi had written about, and with Norton, unrecognizable to herself, if only intermittently, who read and made notes and interpreted Archimboldi’s books” (113). This suggests that, like all detectives and perhaps all poets, Archimboldi has some acquaintance with the night.

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Chapter 4

Ulysses's Last Voyage: Bolaño and the Allegorical Figuration of Hell

raúl rodríguez freire

Translated by Lisa K. Hirschmann

Strindberg's idea: hell is not something that awaits us, but this life here and now.

—Walter Benjamin

There is growing critical consensus among Bolaño scholars that his more extensive novels, *Los detectives salvajes* (*The Savage Detectives*, 1998) and *2666* (2004), pay homage, thematically and stylistically, to the Greek classics, foremost among them epics like *The Odyssey* and *The Aeneid*. It is also evident, at least in English-language novels, that there are tendencies not only to model narratives on such classics but also to rewrite them in innovative fashions. That tradition, in fact, has a genealogy that extends back to Yourcenar and Renault and has been updated by Zachary Mason in *The Lost Books of the Odyssey* (2010) and by Madeline Miller in *The Song of Achilles* (2012), and perhaps no less by the Italian Alessandro Baricco. In the Latin American tradition, one can mention a fairly recent precedent like Fernando del Paso's *Palinuro de México* (*Palinurus of Mexico*, 1977). But no singular contemporary Latin American novel or grouping of them has worked with the intricacies of those classics like Bolaño's, especially while keeping in mind modern palimpsests like James Joyce's *Ulysses*, which in turn takes its cue from Dante. And there is Borges, who rewrites all of them. That said, criticism is at pains to show precise filiations, particularly in terms of characteristics and themes, between Bolaño and his predecessors. But therein lies his subtlety and art, for if he were to "bare the device," as a Russian formalist would have it, Bolaño's



would undermine or, worse, simplify the genealogy he appropriates. Admittedly, there is a cyclical nature to *The Savage Detectives* and *2666*; yes, their taciturn heroes embark on decades-long searches, and yes there are muses and trials all over these novels. But Bolaño does more than refashion or twist these templates reverently, and it is this essay's intention to delineate the ultimate problematics that the Chilean makes so enjoyable and challenging, like the epic (a term he privileges in many interviews and news reports) efforts of his novels. Let us then start at the beginning, with the first Odysseus or Ulysses, and work our way to Bolaño.

I

“Aren't you happy?” “I don't know, Euriloco. I have two natures. One loves the sea, family, the calmness of home...all that. But the other part...that part loves journeys, the open sea, the strange shapes of unknown islands, dragons, storms, giants. Yes, Euriloco, a part of me loves the unknown”

—Mario Camerini's *Ulysses*, 1955

How far Homer's Odysseus is from the Ulysses played by Kirk Douglas in 1954! Although Douglas's Ulysses also returned to his Ithaca, where patient Penelope and gentle Telemachus awaited him, the zeal with which he fights and kills Antinous and the rest of the suitors and the pride with which he challenges Polyphemus and rejects his friends so as to continue to go to bed with Circe (Penelope) make him a stranger for those who remember Odysseus's cries. The latter lamented the difficulties of the journey back to his fatherland and family and broke into tears at the mere thought of his homeland, as if he was once again lost at the very same sea. Homer did not narrate the return of a fanatical adventurer, but that of a humble man, the only Achaean who did not want to go to war if it was going to take him away from his dear Ithaca. He did everything possible to avoid this departure, even feigning madness. It took Agamemnon a month to obtain the favor of his company. For Homer's Odysseus is not an adventurer, but rather one of the most calm and earthly Greeks, one not of the sea, but of the land, and it is there, as the spectral Tiresias foretells, that he will die.

Odysseus travels for reasons far from his own concerns. His duties in Troy will last ten years, as will his return journey, so as to complete a circle that could be called Odyssean, one that will repeat itself with Jason and even Aeneas. In the end, Odysseus's journey in search of

the unknown is closer to modern times than Homer himself. This is due to the marvelous figuration in canto XXVI of *Inferno*, where Dante comes across the son of Laertes and hears him announce his fatal destiny: "Neither the sweetness of a son, nor compassion for my old father, nor the love owed to Penelope, which should have made her glad, could conquer within me the ardor that I had to gain experience of the world and of human vices and worth" (94–99). In only a few lines (52), Dante changed the course of literary history's most famous traveler, supplementing his love of country with a passion for the unexplored, as Douglas's performance reminds us, or, the two greatest Ulysses of the former century, those of Kazantzakis and Joyce, a little while before him. Dante gave us a Ulysses similar to Janus, and since then it has been difficult, if not impossible, to find a man who, to live, needs no more than his family and country.

The desire to go through the Pillars of Hercules was no less than the desire to cross the limit imposed "com Altrui piacque." The search for "virtue and knowledge" leading to an earthly glory does not allow for knowledge of God's love, but rather to a virile and earthly will to action and mundane knowledge. Borges pointed it out in a marvelous essay, "Dante was Ulysses, and in some way he could fear Ulysses's punishment" ("The Last Voyage of Ulysses" 7). But while one triumphed, the other burned in hell, since it is sin, not tragedy, that forms the foundation of the *Comedia*. Nevertheless, the 52 lines of his last journey allowed Ulysses to seduce many writers yet to come, multiplying the immortality of that millenary ancient poet we still call Homer. One of those writers would be Roberto Bolaño, a kind of contemporary rhapsodist who decided to sing the story of a generation condemned to endless wandering, making Dante's Ulysses return, underneath an architecture that recalls the one of the old bard.

II

Thanks to the sins of Dante's Ulysses, we have enjoyed many other versions of this character. Those who would long for adventure and danger (Coleridge, Kazantzakis, and Cavafy) or are made uncomfortable by the journey home (Tennyson, Kukulak, Borges in one of his poems, and, in a way, Brodsky as well) abound. Others, fewer in number, desire the peaceful return home (Du Bellay long before, Joyce in the previous century, possibly Seferis). But Homer's Odysseus has other names and other destinies (like Sinbad, Captain Ahab, Faust, or the narrator of *The Lost Steps* by Carpentier). History returns time

and again, as Borges told a certain Baltasar Espinosa: “it occurred to him that throughout history, humankind has told two stories: the story of a lost ship sailing the Mediterranean seas in quest of a beloved isle, and the story of a god who allows himself to be crucified on Golgotha” (“The Gospel According to Mark” 347). For now, we are interested only in the former, above all because it is a story that has been repeated in so many variations. W. B. Stanford cleverly pointed out that our character

will appear as a sixth-century opportunist, a fifth-century sophist or demagogue, a fourth-century Stoic: in middle age he will become a bold baron or a learned clerk or a pre-Columbian explorer, in the seventeenth century a prince or a politician, in the eighteenth a *philosophe* or a Primal Man, in the nineteenth a Byronic wanderer or a disillusioned aesthete, in the twentieth a proto-Fascist or a humble citizen of a modern Megalopolis. (*Ulysses Theme 4*)

Stanford goes on many of these repetitions (and others), already (or soon to be) forgotten, which contribute enormously to the tradition, even (though not principally) by betraying it, given that “traitor” and “tradition” are separated by only a few letters.

These repetitions are endless, at least until the materialization of death, which, as Tennyson wrote, does away with it all. Nevertheless, there is little doubt that the odysseys will continue, so for now it is enough to analyze the story of the many ships that are to be found; as the noble librarian noted, “Homer composed the *Odyssey*; if we postulate an infinite period of time, with infinite circumstances and changes,” and “the impossible thing is not to compose the *Odyssey*, at least once. No one is anyone, one single immortal man is all men” (“The Immortal” 117).

“The story of a lost ship sailing the Mediterranean seas in quest of a beloved isle” would have been written by an immortal man who would call himself Joseph Cartaphilus. He searched ceaselessly for centuries for a long river whose waters would give him back his humanity. He found it in the form of a spring of clear water, and he remained true to his mission, which, paradoxically, he carried out a few months later in dying.

Cartaphilus’s aforementioned reference to the weaver of *The Odyssey* begins in the following way: “Like Cornelius Agrippa, I am god, I am hero, I am philosopher, I am demon and I am world, which is a tedious way of saying that I do not exist” (Borges, “The Immortal” 117). In the text discovered after his death, he notes that in 1729 he discussed

the origins of the *Iliad* with a certain Giambattista: “his arguments,” he wrote, “seemed to me irrefutable” (119). “The whole world has heard Cornelius Agrippa spoken of,” as Mary Shelley attested, so for now he will be left aside. But who was this Giambattista and what were his arguments? Sábato believed that he was the author of the *Scienza nuova*, which seems likely.

Cartaphilus/Borges gives us the best tools for reading Bolaño, so it is worthwhile to dwell on this a bit longer. Around 1729, Vico had already almost entirely rewritten his *New Science*, first published in 1725, and he was about to publish its second edition. In it, as in the third edition, which I am currently using, there is a chapter entitled “Discovery of the True Homer.” Due to the many uncertainties regarding its origin, Vico points out in paragraph 875 “that the reason why the Greek peoples so vied with each other for the honor of being his fatherland, and why almost all claimed him as citizen, is that the Greek peoples were themselves Homer.” And in the following paragraph, Vico concludes “that the reason why opinions as to his age vary so much is that our Homer truly lived on the lips and in the memories of the peoples of Greece throughout the whole period from the Trojan War down to the time of Numa, a span of 460 years.” Thus, according to Vico, Homer was never a mortal, but rather (and this was one of his most radical arguments) “an idea or a heroic character of Grecian men insofar as they told their history in song” (par. 873). In spite of the fact that Homer’s origin remains to be determined, it is not clear that Vico’s assertions are “irrefutable.” It might be said that they are thought-provoking, as they were for James Joyce and Erich Auerbach, who followed the Neapolitan thinker over the course of almost their entire respective trajectories, and to whom we will soon return. Homer is an idea that has survived almost 30 centuries and that will surely live on for many more. Vico was the first to point out that the journey to which this idea gave eternal life is never the same, its repetition varying from epoch to epoch or cycle to cycle in accordance with how the Neapolitan viewed history (the famous *corso* and *ricorso*, made up by the ages of the Gods, heroes, and men, in this order, and whose succession, which every nation must live, is renewed in a cyclic fashion after the onset of a crisis). It is a teleological story without synthesis and its development does not entail advances. What we today call “culture” entails its own forms of self-understanding from epoch to epoch, which can be observed horizontally, not vertically.

In Vico, there are neither *noble savages* nor ideal civilizations, because his story is that of a process that renews itself after barbarism

returns and does away with everything, initiating a new cycle in doing so. Ulysses can be all the *Ulysses* because, as Cartaphilus pointed out, “in an infinite period of time, all things happen to all men” (“The Immortal” 117), and thus a young Mexican who has traversed the globe in search of nothing at all can be found. So can a Jewish Irishman who walks the streets of Dublin on June 16, 1904, and if Bloom is a new Ulysses, it is because Joyce invented the Ulysses of his time, and no other.

Far from heroic, Bloom is an average citizen—albeit peculiar—who conserves certain Odyssean traits, just as his wandering (his particular circle) will lead him to leave home to become wrapped up, before his return, in a series of episodes that will develop *as if* they were those of *The Odyssey*. Yet it is the most pacific of the refashionings of Homer’s work since Joyce laughed at all heroism. Perhaps the most notorious example of Joyce’s vision is to be found in the spear that Ulysses drives into the eye of the Cyclops, now transformed into a cigar. Bloom leaves his home to carry out his business as if it were any other day, though the funeral he attends in the chapter titled “Hades” might belie this assertion. The funeral is a type of activity that is not regularly attended, yet forms part of a “normal” process of life development, given that the passing of one’s friends and family members cannot be avoided. Joyce, therefore, insists on the secularism of his “character” in such a way that if, in the era of heroes, work was done on the battle front or on journeys to the unknown, in Joyce’s era it is done in butcher’s shops or by publicity agencies, while in the contemporary era, a 20-year-old Mexican can take on the task of incarnating an orphan Ulysses who does not love his homeland. If the *author* of *Ulysses* returns to Homer, he does it because he begins his creation of Bloom and his circumstances, sharing as they do an important motivation: the love of the home. This explains why in 1904 we meet a Ulysses who is home-loving and peaceful, an understanding and affable person who evokes Homer’s Odysseus, also generous and fraternal.

III

When Auerbach wrote *Mimesis* (1942), the conceptual thread connecting the various texts analyzed was referred to as a *figura*, a term that permitted him, as the subtitle demonstrates, to occupy himself with “the representation of reality in Western literature.” Hayden White (1996) rightly made evident the fact that the subtitle robbed Auerbach’s objective of attentive in emphasizing “representation”

before “reality.” The English translation was an obstacle to grasping that in *Mimesis*, representation (*Vorstellung*) does not refer to an object—as the subtitle appears to indicate—but to an act, the very act of presenting a reality (*Wirklichkeit*). For White, then, the best way to understand the subtitle was as “the reality *presented* in Western literature” (emphasis in the original). Yet Auerbach took reality to mean the same as Vico: the historical modulation of human nature (Vico would say “cyclically”) by human actions throughout the course of its obstinate evolution. Thus, if history is made by men, then it can and must be understood by them. As Vico maintained with radical conviction in an era dominated by Cartesianism (to which he was fervently opposed), *we can know only that which we have lived*.

Therefore, *Mimesis* is not a book about representations as such, in other words, about the imitation of an extraverbal reality, but rather (and quite different) a book about the forms in which human experience has been re-*presented* in various texts throughout the course of human history; and as this changes with each epoch, each will have its own figuration of experience and even more than one. However, there will always be one that is dominant or—as in the case of Auerbach—that is privileged. Moreover, human development does not have an endpoint for Vico, but instead remains open to transformation, allowing literature to remain receptive to the renewal of its methods for the portrayal of experiences as well as to the impact of this experience on writers themselves.

Auerbach wrote his literary history by taking the term “figura” or “figuration” as a starting point, but before this matter can be addressed, it is necessary to consider how Jacques Derrida’s “politics of filiation” is repeated and varied in Homer, Joyce, and Bolaño. In Homer, it is introduced and promoted, in Joyce its destruction begins, and in Bolaño it is narrated to the point of radical exhaustion. If that which is still called literature has the potential to present the *event*, then it is still worthwhile to continue to work with it and to defend it unconditionally. There can be no doubt that the next Auerbach will begin one of his or her chapters with passages taken from *2666*.

“The new is not found in what is said, but in the event of its return,” Michel Foucault once indicated (“The Order of Discourse,” 58), and it is for this reason that there can be little doubt that Bolaño rewrote *The Odyssey* in his own way but drawing some characters from Dante’s inferno. This time he returned to the matter of the ship and its return to leave it behind forever. It was not for nothing that Ulises Lima was “baptized” with his name, nor is it a coincidence that *The Savage Detectives* was written in the same temporality as Homer’s

work.¹ This has to do with a central part of the novel's architecture, which Bolaño calls "Polyphemus' Schema."² It may be recalled that Polyphemus (the Cyclops whom Laertes's son tricks by referring to himself as Nobody) means "much spoken of." The game of voices that goes from 1976 to 1996 leads to the belief that Bolaño had in mind a schema that alluded to "those much spoken of," since Ulises Lima takes a certain Arturo Belano for company, and both of them will be spoken of for 20 years. Just as no news of Ithaca is to be had from the lips of Ulysses until the sixth song (*canto*), in *The Savage Detectives* these characters are barely heard except in the abundance of voices that interweave and contradict each other in speaking of them.

That Bolaño always had the work of Homer (and Joyce) in mind can already be seen in what has up to now been considered his first novel, though it was written conjointly with A. G. Porta: *Consejos de un discípulo de Morrison a un fanático de Joyce* (*Advice for a Morrison Disciple from a Joyce Fanatic*, 1984). The title is thought-provoking and attention-grabbing on its own. Ángel Ros is the fanatical leader of *The Doors* who, together with Ana Ríos, trumpets at the "daily life's highpoints." *Introibo ad altare Dei*. Ángel (and Ana) dedicate themselves to hold-ups and writing a novel with a certain Dedalus, also a thief, as a character. It concerns a "decadent" "without a way out" who decides to abandon literature completely when he has already reached old age, with the exception of an author named James Joyce. Just like Ana, the fictional Dedalus dies in an attempted robbery. Ángel, however, manages to escape the ambush targeting him and his gang. After getting in a car to flee the cursed place, he lights a cigarette and remarks, "As soon as the *sirens* could be heard, Ulysses had escaped again" (145–46; emphasis added). The word *siren* in this sentence is revealing, referring not to the "marine nymph with a women's bust and a bird's body, who led sailors astray from their native lands with the sweetness of their song" (Dictionary of the Real Academia Española), but rather to the one that, aboard a ship, in accordance with Bolaño's temporality, produces an infernal noise that can also lead one adrift (at least this is the case of the green Mymidons who ride inside the police vehicle).

Like *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Bolaño and Porta's book also ends with a diary, where we read that a Mexican poet named Mario Santiago had recited a poem entitled "Advice for a Fanatic of Heidegger from a Disciple of Marx," and whose echo is heard clearly in Bolaño's Dedalus. The novel, which was published

again in 2005, comes accompanied by a story (“Bar diary”), again written conjointly, along with a short text that serves as a prologue in which Porta attempts to recall the writing process. His memory, he tells us, is not as good as he would like, forcing him to make use of an old letter that he received from Bolaño during the writing process. Porta shares a paragraph of what would become the first of many letters on the subject, written in December of 1981, when the author of *The Savage Detectives* “proposed a series of changes to the protagonists” of the incipient novel:

To insert them in a certain prototype that would allow us to play games and wink at readers; b) to clarify—make more complex—the scenography through which they move; for example, to make it more clearly *noir*; c) to work on the female protagonist and perhaps add one or two more of them; d) to focus the novel ourselves as if we were filming an adventure movie, allowing ourselves all of the cuts, all of the montages, etc.; e) to make the Joycean bent of the main character even more pronounced; in fact, to make this into one of the work’s *leitmotifs*; to do with Joyce—or his Ulysses—in a modest way, and in that of the “thriller,” what he himself did with Homer and *The Odyssey*. Of course! The difference is huge. But it can be turn out to be very interesting, a kind of *dripping* in the manner of Jackson Pollack, the transference of Joycean symbols and obsessions to a novel that is quick, violent and brief. (*Advice* 10)

Of course, “the difference is huge” and “can turn out to be very interesting” for some readers because Bolaño did not forget this Joycean bent, but just transformed or redoubled it in another, in a “double bent” both Homeric and Dantesque. Like Joyce and Bloom, Ulises Lima is a response to his time and age. It can hardly be expected that he come across a Cyclops or lotus eaters, or with Scylla and Charybdis, at least not as they were thought up by Homer. The traces of this Ulises, along with his companion Belano, both continuously disappearing, will be followed for two decades, always revealing an escape from death on endless occasions. Wars and dictatorships, loves and infernal caves, as well as mysterious islands are some of the tasks that they must face.

Homer’s Ulysses arrives on the island of the Phaiakians in a moribund state; Nausikaa found him lying naked on a riverbank, and from then on his destiny is aglitter, he returns to life and to Ithaca. The fortune that Ulises Lima recounts in the story of his journey to hidden islands is very different, given that only a single catastrophe

is encountered. Jacinto Requena, whom Lima told of his voyage, remarked

One day I asked him where he'd been. He told me that he'd traveled along a river that connects Mexico and Central America. As far as I know, there is no such river. But he told me he'd traveled along this river and that now he could say he knew its twists and tributaries. A river of trees or a river of sand or a river of trees that in certain stretches became a river of sand. A constant flow of people without work, of the poor and starving, drugs and suffering. A river of clouds he'd sailed on for twelve months, where he'd found countless islands and outposts, although not all the islands were settled, and sometimes he thought he'd stay and live on one of them forever or that he'd die there. Of all the islands he'd visited, two stood out. The island of the past, he said, where the only time was past time and the inhabitants were bored and more or less happy, but where the weight of illusion was so great that the island sank a little deeper into the river every day. And the island of the future, where the only time was the future, and the inhabitants were planners and strivers, such strivers, said Ulises, that they were likely to end up devouring one another. (*The Savage Detectives* 334–35)

In the last case, if Ulysses's *hades* is a funeral, then Southern Africa, a continent dominated by chaos, where everything is on the brink of abyss and where death reigns, where Belano voyages in order to get himself killed, could well be its refashioning.

Furthermore, Ulises is not even a sailor, or at most a “fisherman of souls of the House of the Lake,” nor does he have a Laertes, or believe in any Ithaca: “All poets, even the most avant-garde, need a father. But these poets were meant to be orphans” (161), as Manuel Maples Arce points out. Lima and Belano leave Mexico, which is to say that they leave Latin America, and nothing more will be known of them. The last thing that is said of Ulises is that he is possibly dead (although an academic who studies the Visceral Realists proves this to be untrue years later). In any case, Ulises is the “total vagabond,” one that, like Baudelaire, departs for the sake of the departure, as what is important is the itinerancy itself. Hence, we find him lost and without a desire to return, *in* Mexico City. As Bolaño put it, “Since Heraclitus we have known that no journey, no matter its kind, even the motion-less ones, has a return: when one opens his eyes everything has changes, everything is continuously displaced” (*Bolaño por sí mismo* 93). We do not know what becomes of Belano since the last time he is mentioned he is in Liberia, and Jacobo Urenda tells us that

he went off with the photographer López Lobo, “as if they were off on an excursion, and then they crossed the clearing and were lost in the underbrush” (*The Savage Detectives* 581).

IV

Detectives re-presents for us the experience—or what remains of it—of the exhaustion of the Odyssean circle, one that has pervaded representations of Western beginning with Homer, encompassing Apollo of Rhodes and Virgil and later Dante, Shakespeare, and Milton, and even Faulkner and magical realism, which brings it back in an incredible way. As in *The Lost Steps*, nostalgia, one of the other names of the “Father,” engulfs everything, like the river that prevents the narrator from returning to his Ithaca because his trip, like that of Aeneas, is also a return journey to the fatherland.

It is the nostalgia for the “Father” (*patria*, homeland, nation, God, etc.) that seeks to complete the Odyssean circle, however it is manifest. Nostalgia pertains to a weakness and tremendous fear of the outdoors, to a sense of helplessness in the face of nature and also in the face of culture. In this context, the Odyssean circle occupies the place of a treasure that must be zealously guarded if one is to avoid the sense that “Daddy’s home” is a chimera or that “the tender care of a benevolent Providence” has been lost, as Freud would say; but one cannot remain a child for his or her entire life, and at some point one must venture to leave home, like Arturo and Lima, and to not only depart but to face up to the world in the manner suggested by Hugo de San Víctor: as though it were a foreign land. Bolaño sees this matter to be just so in a splendid fashion, though very soon he also understands that when one leaves home he or she can get tied up with characters like Ayala (2666) or Wieder (*Estrella distante*), or like General Lebon, the 19-year-old general, and that once this happens, there is no going back. This is not the only thing that Bolaño understood. He relates something more, since warnings of the dangers lying in wait on the journey are provided in the form of Ulises’s scar and even by other signals before it.

Bolaño maintains that today no one lives securely even in his own home, which makes the fantasy of the Odyssean circle into a false treasure, useless in a time of demons or of hell. It made little difference, since Bolaño understands perfectly that no longer can one descend to Hades because Hades itself had already rose up so as to take control of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, just as Remedios Varo portrayed on canvas and Auxilio Lacouture and Cesárea Tinajero prophesized.

V

One could maintain that almost all of Bolaño's work is a sort of *rewriting* of his own books and those of others, and it could also be argued, as some already have, that all of his work is permeated by death and evil. And, as Walter Benjamin pointed out, writing + death = allegory. Without relying excessively on the model of allegory that Fredric Jameson proposed for Third World narratives, Bolaño's work can be understood principally, though not exclusively, in relation to this concept, one whose real complexity has been forgotten, as it actually encompasses more than topics pertaining to mourning (which is how it has been addressed in recent time in Latin America and in Chile in particular) and the rewriting process understood as imitation (which is how it had been approached by some art critics in the United States). History is captured in a skull, and this, recalled Benjamin, is the emblem of allegory, the same one that turned in *Huesos en el desierto*, by Sergio Rodríguez González, into one of the fundamental books for the writing of "The Part about the Crimes."

Several years ago, the art critic Craig Owens affirmed that "an unmistakably allegorical impulse has begun to reassert itself in various aspects of contemporary culture" ("The Allegorical Impulse" 68), an impulse that has not lost, but rather gained, in strength. The intentional or selective appropriation of images from the past, sometimes "fragmentary, imperfect or incomplete," and their supplementation allow for the possibility of new images for which fragmentation is the best presentation. At the center of this impulse is the interpretation that returns and sometimes betrays or distorts its own filiation, causing the forcefulness of the new proposed images to take on a visionary clarity. Yet this emphasis on allegory would be incomplete if the fact that allegory "finds its most comprehensive expression in the ruin" (70) is overlooked.

With allegory as the method of interpretation of *Detectives*, what Bolaño is doing with *The Odyssey* and the tradition that follows Homer becomes clear. By describing Bolaño's relationship to tradition as "fragmentary, intermittent, or chaotic" ("The Allegorical Impulse" 69), I want to insist on the difficulty of understanding the radical nature of his work, if the novel is not read as an allegorical rewriting of the second Homeric work and Dante's Canto XXVI, which it seizes and supplements in a determinant fashion, and one that is essential to understanding the experience of contemporary reality. Bolaño's Ulises is Dantesque, but he travels in order to deconstruct Homer's Odysseus. A fragmentary and incomplete work, full of voices

that conflict and contradict one another, *Detectives* also foreshadows the disastrous future that it brings about in 2666.

This foretelling can be perfectly understood if the allegory is considered in conjunction with the *figura*, used interchangeably at more than one point in time. It is true that Auerbach was opposed to allegoric readings, but he never specified that they could not be brought together. He knew that Benjamin dedicated himself to this task, and maybe preferred that the latter continued to do so. What is strange is that Auerbach insisted that allegory lacked “a definite event in its full historicity” (“Figura” 54), something that Benjamin challenged clearly in *The Arcades Project*.

Auerbach does not make this explicit, but the *figura* shares with allegory its repetition (or rewriting or seizing of past images)—that the philologists called “that which manifests itself again”—and its supplementation—which he calls “that which transforms itself.” What is in question are the *figura*'s two most persistent characteristics. Yet there is still another characteristic, and it is this last one that will be useful here: its prophetic capacity. The figural interpretation employs two main elements, the *figura* as such and its fulfillment; it emerged when the Christians needed to reconcile the Old Testament with the New, when they needed to provide themselves with an explanation for Christ. For Christians, then, the first element configured and fulfilled the second. Auerbach gives the following definition: “*figura* is something real and historical which announces something else that is also real and historical” (29). He elaborates more clearly, “Figural interpretation establishes a connection between two events or persons, the first of which signifies not only itself but also the second, while the second encompasses or fulfills the first. The two poles of the figure are separate in time, but both, being real events or figures, are within time, within the stream of historical life” (“Figura” 53). My hypothesis here that *The Savage Detectives* can also be read using this interpretive key, and what I therefore care to emphasize, is how this novel configures 2666 (and “The Part about the Crimes” in particular) and how it can be read allegorically. Thus, in the reading I am proposing, the *figura* presages an allegorical event.

Cesárea Tinajero is not a mother, as has been suggested, but rather a seer, as Bolaño has done away with all paternal figures, making women the heroines of his tragedies. Bolaño reveals—and breaks explicitly with—the exhaustion of the dominant modes of filiation that have characterized a large part of the writing practices in Latin America, overloaded as they have been with patriarchal and localist

novels. One woman, Laura Damián, baptizes Alfredo Martínez with the name Ulises Lima (41) shortly before passing away, a gesture that attaches the most famous of Greek names (in Latinized form) to a Latin American figure, making this Ulises a peripheral supplement that overtly decenters the myth of *origins*. It is also a woman who saves Ulises's life, since Cesárea, like Aldonza Lorenzo, threw herself upon the would-be agent of the young poet's end, leading to her own death. Cesárea's death explodes in multiple directions since it is the spectral rhizome that structures the whole novel, a figure similar to *Don Quixote's* Dulcinea, who is imagined as a princess and appears "like a phantom battleship" (641). In the same way, the mother of the young Mexican poets is a woman, another wandering seer named Auxilio Lacouture, who full well could have told us who would read Bolaño in 2666. But "having possession of the truth," Blanck recalled, "is not synonymous with passing it on" (32), and it would seem to be that once Cesárea glimpsed the evil that was approaching, a horrible evil impossible to communicate to others, the best or the only option remaining was to disappear; the world appeared impossible to inhabit, now that there were not even treasures left to lessen its burdens. To appear in order to never return was her strategy and legacy and the oracle that foretold her death.³

The teacher who manages to give the news about Cesárea Tinajero to the passengers of the Impala notes that the ex-member of the avant-garde had drawn a plan of the canned food factory where she worked. And

she had the courage to ask Cesárea why she had drawn the plan. And Cesárea said something about days to come . . . 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. (634)

It was the first canned food factory in Santa Teresa, where Cesárea worked, and that factory would prefigure those garment factories (sweatshops) that decades later would be at the center of the hundreds of thousands of brutal assassinations of women. These women must have mothers or daughters or granddaughters of those who Ulises Lima found in that river "of people without work, of poor and starving," "a river that connects Mexico and Central America," and that is today called migration. That river turned up some of those women that appeared dead in places like the landfill called "El Chile."

The teacher interviewed by the detectives also asked the poet about what she was writing, and Cesárea responded that she was writing about a Greek called Hypatia. The teacher would later find out on her own that Hypatia was a philosopher from Alexandria who died at the hands of the Christians around 415 AD, and the teacher would wonder if maybe Cesárea had identified herself with Hypatia. And that is how it was, although the founder of Visceral Realism anticipated the future, since the similarities did not materialize in life. Having met early deaths and having only become the subject of investigation in due time, very little is known of either one of them, except that they were linked by teaching. We also know that the work they left is very scarce: an unfinished poem in the case of the poet and a few titles in the case of the philosopher. One of them ran a school and the other embodied a movement, Hellenism, and the avant-garde, respectively, and both ended with their deaths.

But there is something else that does not have to do with the order of similarities, but instead with the interpretation of Hypatia's death. In *The Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Edward Gibbon staunchly argued that the philosopher's death at the hands of fanatical Christians was the embodiment of the death of all of classical civilization and the advent of a new age, as if Cesárea's death also made this visible, a new age, not Christian but infernal, a new obscurantism. Yet there is still something more since the very death of Hypatia, described by Socrates Scholasticus in his *Church History (Historia Ecclesiastica)*, is shockingly similar to the deaths in Sonora. Since she (Hypatia) tended to speak with Orestes [the Roman emperor's representative is Alexandria] often, she was accused by the Christians in a slanderous fashion of being the obstacle that was preventing Orestes's reconciliation with the bishop. Some of them, led by a teacher called Peter, hurriedly ran pressed on by a wild fanaticism, beat her as she returned to her house, pulling her out of her carriage and carrying her to a temple called Cesareum, where they undressed her and killed her with pieces of ceramics taken from the debris [cutting her skin and her body with sharpened seashells]. After quartering her body, they brought the pieces to Cinaron and burned them (Casado, *Las damas* 50). The Mexican poet wrote about a philosopher who was brutally murdered in a temple that bore her same name, Cesáreo, a temple and a murder that seem to foretell those crimes that would be found in 2666, crimes about which Bolaño had already begun to write years before his posthumous work. Cesárea's death, like that of hundreds of women after her, took place in Sonora, and spilled her blood in order to give life to Ulises Lima, so that he could somehow

testify to what she had foretold and what unfortunately would not come to pass. How then can we read Bolaño's work if not allegorically and figuratively? And if this is the case, there is still one point to be made.

Vico pointed out that human history culminated in chaos and absolute degeneration before again beginning a new cycle. He lived in the era of men, in which rationality supposedly strengthened the pleasures of living. Far from it, in anticipation of Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*, Vico had understood perfectly "the barbarism of reflection" (381). What he may not have understood, as a man of his time, was the radicalization of that barbarism and that chaos, a radicalization that could have given way to a fourth era. In this regard, the conservative Harold Bloom argued in *The Western Canon* (1994) (a book Bolaño knew well) that "our century, while pretending to continue the Democratic Age, cannot be better characterized than as Chaotic" (2), which obviously would suggest to reflect on the "chaotic age." But "chaotic" does not account for the continuity that Vico glimpsed among gods, heroes, and men, and for this reason, the era following the divine, heroic, and human ages should be one suited to succeed them.

Perhaps we can find a suitable name for it in Cartaphilus, who claimed to be, like Cornelius Agrippa, "god, hero, philosopher and demon... which is a tedious way of saying that I do not exist"; this leads me to believe that the demonic age is the one that best names the present. We know that nothing is mere coincidence in Bolaño, and hence that the number that follows the "2" in the title of his posthumous work is not innocent. The number 666 is not just the day of the beast ("el día de la bestia") nor the allegory for the coming of an individual called the Anti-Christ. Bolaño, like Borges, played with numbers, but never quite as much. The number 666 is not just the coming, but the establishment of a total evil, one that the number 2 only repeats... in Europe and in Mexico, which is to say on both sides of the world. This is why Bolaño shows us that we are no longer secure even in our own homes, since no matter how much we try to hide, evil invades everything and there are no treasures that will help us face it, except madness.

In 2666, we meet a certain María Expósito, who came across two youths who got around in a car in 1976 and who "appeared to be fleeing something and who, after a dizzying week, she never saw again" (588). María would be the first woman, in the long line of Expósito's, who would bear a child without having been raped. Over the course of that week she fed the youths, and "each night they made love to

her, in the car or on the warm desert sand, until one morning she came to meet them and they were gone" (558). It is pertinent to recall that after the death of Cesárea, Ulises Lima and Arturo Belano distance themselves from Lupe and García Madero, and it appears that they are the ones who conceive María Expósito's child in a ménage à trois. The fruit of that encounter would be Olegario Cura Expósito, called Lalo, Lalo Cura (Lalo Cura = La loCura), by his friends. Once grown up, Lalo will be recruited to form part of the Sonora police, where he will learn (and be the only one to use) the assertive techniques of criminal investigation and study them as if he were at the "Unknown University" (the "Universidad desconocida"). Lalo Cura will be the only force we can count on to face up to the hell that will overwhelm us. I hope that the madness/literature that Bolaño has left us can also help us in this struggle.

Notes

1. *Detectives'* initial structure, encompassing the years 1975–1995, seems to confirm that the 20-year period narrated by Bolaño has its origin in the 20 years of Odyssean travel. Though the reason for the modification of the timescale is not known for certain (perhaps it was because he did not earn enough so as to allow him to work on the novel), the two decades have no purpose other than to tie the work to that of Homer. See Bolaño, "Petition for a Guggenheim Grant" 77–84. Nor is it a coincidence that this schema has a prelude that begins on November 2, the Day of the Dead. It is a coincidence, I believe, that Bolaño won the Herralde Award (Premio Herralde) for this particular work on November 2, 1998, thereupon beginning his great journey to undeniable fame.
2. See Bolaño, "Petition for a Guggenheim Grant" 84.
3. Amadeo Salvatierra remembers the following: "night was falling over Mexico City and Cesárea laughed like a ghost, like the invisible woman she was about to become, a laugh that made my heart shrink, a laugh that made me want to run away from her and at the same time made me understand beyond the shadow of a doubt that there was no place I could run to" (487).

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Chapter 5

“Con la cabeza en el abismo”: Roberto Bolaño’s *The Savage Detectives* and *2666*, Literary *Guerrilla*, and the Maquiladora of Death

Martín Camps

El mundo era un ataúd lleno de chirridos.

—2666, 572

In this essay, I examine *The Savage Detectives* (published in 1998, and translated in 2007),¹ a novel that received the XVI Herralde Novel Award and launched Bolaño’s professional literary career (shortened by liver failure in 2003), and *2666* (released posthumously in 2004 and translated into English in 2008), the novel that occupied the last five years of his life. In the first novel, he explores the cult of the literary figure and an emerging anarchic literary *guerrilla* group named the “real visceralistas.” The plots of the two novels revolve around the search for writers in the city of Santa Teresa, pseudonym of Ciudad Juárez, Mexico: Cesárea Tinajero, in *The Savage Detectives*, and Benno von Archimboldi, in *2666*. In this essay, I examine *The Savage Detectives* and *2666* in the light of an imaginary locus alluding to Ciudad Juárez and the north of Mexico as a fictional space that absorbed Bolaño, particularly in view of the femicides in Ciudad Juárez (a topic that has generated several novels, documentaries, and films).² These femicides were the tragic preamble to a slaughter by drug trafficking groups that has annihilated eleven thousand people in this city of one million inhabitants. Finding the missing literary figures, however, is not as important in these novels as the quest itself and the narration of the crimes committed.

Northern Mexico, as seen in the short story “Gómez Palacio,” was a major focus of Bolaño’s literary production. The title of the novel *2666* may make reference to a cemetery of thousands of crosses or, as other novels that use numbers in their titles, it may point to an apocalyptic scenario (*Catch-22*, *Fahrenheit 451*, 1984). This may mark *2666* as an omen of the slaughter that Ciudad Juárez was about to suffer from 2008 to 2012, with indiscriminate killings of eleven thousand citizens (the amount of lives lost only in Ciudad Juárez), together with an unknown number of disappeared citizens and an entire nation wracked by fear.³ Bolaño chose this city to construct a narrative of the end of times; in the second part of the book, for example, he imitates the cold language of forensic reports in order to relate the suffering of hundreds of women that were raped, mutilated, and dumped in the desert. The “horrorism”⁴ of this section is an attempt to give at least an account of what happened to the women, because, in reality, many of the crimes were not solved or investigated properly, despite the attempt to fabricate culprits or provide feeble explanations that such horrors were simply the result of domestic violence or gang warfare. As is well known, the perpetrators have not been indicted. Indeed, “horrorism” is a neologism necessary for a new level of criminality: “linguistic innovation becomes imperative in an epoch in which violence strikes mainly, though not exclusively, the defenseless” (Cavarero 3). In the case of Ciudad Juárez, it reached a new level of atrociousness where daily crimes became the norm, and the incompetency on the part of the authorities to curb this rise in violence became glaringly evident.

A Savage Subversive Detective

The Savage Detectives was awarded the Rómulo Gallegos prize. In his acceptance speech, Bolaño articulates how to achieve excellence when writing: “Know how to stick your head in the dark, know how to jump into the abyss, know that literature is basically a dangerous business.”⁵ This is an obsessive idea in Bolaño: he conceives of the writer as a man who risks all for his profession. This is particularly the case of poets,⁶ because, although they know they will be defeated, they continue writing. I will study *The Savage Detectives* as the blueprint of Bolaño’s literary world and its resemblance in theme and technique to *2666*. Both novels could be considered the two major pillars of his literary production.

In the first two parts of *The Savage Detectives*, titled “Mexicanos perdidos en México (1975)” (Mexicans Lost in Mexico, 1975), he

depicts a small poetic movement called the "Visceral Realists," commanded by Arturo Belano (Bolaño's alter ego) and Ulises Lima (alias of the poet Mario Santiago Papasquiaro). Bolaño offers a persuasive, erudite voice, reminiscent of a Borgesian device: an important trait of this novel hinges on its humor and irreverence, specifically with regards to the iconoclastic view of established writers, as seen in this peculiar classification:

Within the vast ocean of poetry he identified various currents: faggots, queers, sissies, freaks, butches, fairies, nymphs, and philenes. But the two major currents were faggots and queers. Walt Whitman, for example, was a faggot poet. Pablo Neruda, a queer. William Blake was definitely a faggot. Octavio Paz was a queer. Borges was a philene, or in other words he might be a faggot one minute and simply asexual the next. Rubén Darío was a freak, in fact, the queen freak, the prototypical freak. (112)⁷

Bolaño debunks the seriousness of literary figures with this peculiar taxonomy of writers in terms of their level of queerness, particularly demystifying Octavio Paz, who becomes the principal enemy in the novel. Paz, as is well known, was consecrated with the Nobel Prize in literature and was the editor-in-chief of *Vuelta* (1976–1998), an influential magazine that showcased the Mexican intelligentsia of the era. *The Savage Detectives* is a novel about poets written by a novelist who first and foremost considered himself a bard. Most of this polyphonic novel deals with the diary of Juan García Madero and his acceptance to the poet group of the Visceral Realists. Some of the entries in the novel are brief, like the following dated on December 1: "I didn't go to the Fonts' house. I was fucking Rosario all day"⁸; and on that same page: "Depressed all day, but writing and reading like a steam engine" (133).⁹ García Madero mentions his wanderings in the city, his petty thefts, and his encounter with a sui generis group of poets: "a little library has already begun to grow from my thefts and visits to bookstores" (140).¹⁰ The first part of the novel, titled "Mexicans Lost in Mexico," could be recognized, in part, as what is called in Mexico a "novela de la onda," particularly with regards to the use of colloquial language and its recounting of a young writer's bohemian lifestyle in the "concrete jungle" of Mexico City. The narrator mentions his visit to a prostitute, as well as his interactions with an out-of-the-ordinary upper-class family. While in the first part, characters are presented and carefully described, in the second, there is a kaleidoscopic vision of them.

The second part of *The Savage Detectives* comprises the years 1976–1996. Although there is less connection between the chapters, they are sustained by multiple narrators. Thus, one of the characters, Luis Sebastián Rosado, states: “This country is a disgrace, it must be said, and so is Mexican literature, it must also be said” (199).¹¹ It also introduces a character that returns in 2666: “Who’s Archiboldi? said Luscious Skin. Those visceral realists really are ignoramuses. One of the greatest French novelists, I told him, though hardly any of his work has been translated into Spanish” (215).¹² Here, the character is a major literary figure, not a lesser-known German writer as in 2666, which we will discuss later.

The novel also parodies poetry festivals, the contented realm of the literary cultural power, in the following way:

What thou lovest well remains, said someone who was standing nearby and had overheard us, a light-skinned guy in a double-breasted suit and red tie who was the official poet of San Luis Potosí, and right there, as if his words had been the starting pistol shot, or in this case the departing shot, major chaos broke out, with Mexican and Nicaraguan writers autographing books for each other. (362)¹³

Bolaño exposes the excesses incurred by deceitful poets and the corruption of the literary system and in doing so he gains presence in the literary landscape. Again, Barbara Patterson states: “When I came home, there he’d be at the door, sitting on the steps or on the ground, in an Américas T-shirt that stank of sweat, drinking his Tecate and shooting the shit with his friends, this little group of brain-dead teenagers who called him Poet Man” (366).¹⁴ Bolaño conveys the desire of becoming a “man of letters,” but he despises the necessary means to becoming one, the falsehood of the literary establishment codes and performances, which seem to promote mediocrity.

Near the end, the novel returns to the central line of the narration, which is the quest to find Cesárea Tinajero, allegedly an “estri-dentista” poet of the Mexican avant-garde movement (a boisterous movement based in Veracruz, with Arqueles Vela and Germán List Arzubide at the forefront, which mocked the “Contemporáneos” writers and their Dandy-like conceits).

The novel moves within the tensions and distensions of literature, Chile and Mexico, and finding the apocryphal writer Tinajero, but with no real objective. Through the voice of Andrés Ramírez, we hear about a Chilean adjusting in Mexico: “If a Chilean has strong

arms and isn't lazy, he can make a living anywhere" (398).¹⁵ Later: "Descartes, Andrés Bello, Arturo Prat, the men who left their mark on our long, narrow strip of land" (401)¹⁶; "Like a good Chilean, the desire to get ahead gnawed at me" (404)¹⁷; "But like a good Chilean I refused to accept this, that there was anything I couldn't know, and I began to read and read" (405).¹⁸ He also mentions how Chile is an island cloistered by nature and Chileans themselves could be the Moai population: "Have you ever heard the theory of Easter Island? According to the theory, Chile is the real Easter Island. You know: to the east we're bordered by the Andes, to the north by the Atacama Desert, to the south by Antarctica, and to the west by the Pacific Ocean" (406).¹⁹

The following passage could be read as the poetics of the novel, the preoccupation with the posterity of the work and the realization of its limited reach. In Iñaki Echavarne's words,

For a while, Criticism travels side by side with the Work, then Criticism vanishes and it's the Readers who keep pace. The journey may be long or short. Then the Readers die one by one and the Work continues on alone, although a new Criticism and new Readers gradually fall into step with it along its path. Then Criticism dies again and the Readers die again and the Work passes over a trail of bones on its journey toward solitude. To come near the work, to sail in her wake, is a sign of certain death, but new Criticism and new Readers approach her tirelessly and relentlessly and are devoured by time and speed. Finally the Work journeys irremediably alone in the Great Vastness. And one day the Work dies, as all things must die and come to an end: the Sun and the Earth and the Solar System and the Galaxy and the farthest reaches of man's memory. Everything that begins as comedy ends as tragedy. (403)²⁰

The novel is the construction of the literary voice, the doubts and the faith in literature; in the words of Marco Antonio Palacios, we hear: "Discipline: writing every morning for at least six hours. Writing every morning and revising in the afternoons" (487).²¹ The novel could be in part a sort of "letters for a young writer" or a portrait of the artist as a young man, the Joycean formative years of Stephan Dedalus engaging in hedonist experiences, and the slow metamorphosis of becoming a writer. This seems to be a recurrent theme also in *2666* when, in the last part of the novel, Ansky reflects on Ivanov's (a science fiction writer) fear in his writing: "Fear of failure and making a spectacle of oneself. But above all, fear of being no good. Fear of forever dwelling

in the hell of bad writers” (722).²² In jail, Archimboldi decides to become an important writer who risks all for his work: “By now I knew it was pointless to write. Or that it was worth it only if one was prepared to write a masterpiece” (786).²³ The writer is exhausted, he wants to stop writing and just dedicate his life to reading.²⁴ And just like the author in real life, the character states: “I don’t have much time. I’m busy dying” (790).²⁵

In the third and last part of *The Savage Detectives*, entitled “Sonoran Deserts”²⁶ (1976), we return to the narrative voice of Juan García Madero. The poets run away from a pimp and a corrupt police officer on a Chevy Impala with Lupe, a prostitute. Some visual elements are introduced here that resemble avant-garde visual experiments. For example, “a Mexican seen from above”²⁷ shows one circle in the center of another, depicting a view of a sombrero from above. These playful experiments might be indebted to Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* (1759), which ridicules literary solemnity and is one of the main purposes of *The Savage Detectives*. Some of these ekphrastic poems are by Tinajero, the avant-garde poet. After finding Tinajero in Sonora, the novel ends with some squares that ask: what is behind the window? He shows an empty square and responds: “An extended sheet.”²⁸ The last frame has a few intermittent lines, but there is no response. In his analysis of these figures, Fernando Saucedo Lastra suggests that the novel is an allusion to “the imminence of disappearance and emptiness” (n.p.) and the keys to unravel the complexity of the novel.

The Savage Detectives is a novel about Mexico City, a Joycean Bildungsroman, but it is also a road novel that sets its eyes on the north of Mexico: “When we woke up we were in Santa Teresa.”²⁹ The location of the novel in this city, the refuge for Tinajero, perhaps announces the surge of the novel from the north and the weakening of a tradition of cultural centralism. However, the novel is definitely an exploration of the literary scene in Mexico’s center, a closed ghetto with several internal fights and solemn rituals that periodically selects a king to establish a bureaucracy of relevance in a regulated and brutal world of letters. It leaves a sizeable panorama of perfectly integrated and arranged voices and thoughts in the manner of self-contained novels (such as those by Julio Cortázar, Carlos Fuentes, and Lezama Lima), which keeps resounding after the reading is over. The novel sets the stage for Bolaño’s magnum opus, which takes place in Santa Teresa, the fictional name of Ciudad Juárez, dealing with crimes against women, the main topic of his last novel. As Chris Andrews writes in his recent book: “Bolaño expanded or ‘exploded’ his own published texts, blowing them up by adding new characters and episodes as well

as circumstantial details" (xii). His literary machinery will have characters migrate in between novels to compose his particular world.

Savage Capitalism as a Serious Killer

In *The Femicide Machine*, Sergio González Rodríguez points out that Ciudad Juárez's anomalous ecology creates the proper conditions for a machinery that tortures and kills young women. In this ecology, there are more than three hundred "maquiladoras" or sweatshops that hire "young señoritas" to perform duties suited to their "young hands," such as the tedious job of performing the same mechanical operation until muscular atrophy. The influx of corporate tax money into the city constantly bends the laws for labor fairness and environmental protection. González Rodríguez follows the history of the development of the border, since the Border Industrialization program (PRONAF) in 1965, which invited corporations to settle in Ciudad Juárez in exchange for low wages and relaxed industry laws: "In Ciudad Juárez, low wages and poor quality of life result not only in real shortages, but also symbolic ones. People become dehumanized, reduced to being one more cog in an enormous production machine: the ultra-capitalist city" (37).

Indeed, Ciudad Juárez has been a guinea pig for global expansion and an example of cultural colonization, which was facilitated by its proximity to the United States. Assembly line production and cheap labor translated into a depreciation of life and the appearance of drug lords who installed their own industry of death, a "maquiladora de la muerte" (sweatshop of death), which devalues life. Workers assemble televisions, cars, materials for the First World, but paradoxically they do not have the economic power to buy them. They are allowed to touch, manufacture, fix, but their salaries prevent them from owning, which suggests a perfect economic apartheid. This correlation between labor and the industry of death echoes Hannah Arendt's position in regard to Nazi and Bolshevik totalitarian "factories of annihilation," where "radical evil has emerged in connection to a system in which all men have become equally superfluous... the totalitarian murderers are all the more dangerous because they do not care if they themselves are alive or dead, if they ever lived or never were born" (Lawrence and Karim 443). Thus, the global outsourcing solution, in the case of the search of cheap labor in Juárez's maquiladoras, became a conduit to the "superfluosity" of life, particularly of border women. In this context, Bolaño introduced the theme of the Nazi extermination camps in the third part of *2666* to establish

a link between the systematic killings of women in Juárez as a silent holocaust.

Borders are transforming into a porous membrane that affects both sides. They are the border between the First World and the Third World, development and underdevelopment, English and Spanish; the effects of the needs from the north are felt immediately on the borders precisely because of the interconnectedness of economic and human exchange. In this context, González Rodríguez writes: “Unlike old-fashioned, static national borders, twenty-first century borders are liquid and flexible. This results in the interactive penetration of cultures from both sides. This new kind of border creates a *transborder*. It produces *translineal* spaces that alter the meaning and representation of identity and function with these regions” (57; emphasis in the original).

2666

The first palpable mark of 2666 is the immensity of the project, 1,125 pages, divided into five parts, with an the epigraph from the seventh stanza of Baudelaire’s poem “The Voyage,” included in *Les fleurs du mal* (*Flowers of Evil*, 1857):

How sour the knowledge travelers bring away.
The world’s monotonous and small; we see
ourselves today, tomorrow, yesterday,
an oasis of horror in sands of ennui!³⁰

Bolaño only reproduces the last verse in Spanish (“Une oasis d’horreur dans un désert d’ennui!” in the original), capturing the boredom of the north of Mexico that was described in a short story called “Gómez Palacio” (the name of a small town in Durango, Mexico, where the character goes to give a literary workshop). The first note to the murders of women is given on page 64, when Morini reads a newspaper clipping about the murders in the northern state of Sonora that appeared in the Italian newspaper *Il Manifesto*. On a quest to find Archimboldi, three German literary critics fly to Santa Teresa and rent three rooms in Hotel Mexico. We are told that the city appeared to them as “an enormous camp of gypsies or refugees ready to pick up and move at the slightest prompting” (111).³¹

The literary critics’ mission in the novel is to find the man whom they consider to be the best German writer of the twentieth century, a Nobel Prize contender. They want to convince him to go back to

Germany and discuss his works in order to solve, once and for all, the doubts and questions that they, the foremost scholars of his writings, have encountered. The struggles among literary groups and the collaborations among influential intellectuals are one of the main themes Bolaño incorporates from *The Savage Detectives*:

In Mexico, and this might be true across Latin America, except in Argentina, intellectuals work for the state. It was like that under the PRI and it'll be the same under the PAN. The intellectual himself may be a passionate defender of the state or a critic of the state. The state doesn't care. The state feeds him and watches over him in silence. And it puts this giant cohort of essentially useless writers to use... An intellectual can work at the university, or, better, go to work for an American university, where the literature departments are just as bad as in Mexico... intellectuals *always* believe they deserve better. (121; emphasis in the original)³²

The collaboration among powerful intellectuals is also a topic in *Nocturno en Chile (By Night in Chile, 2000)*, where amidst an upper-class gathering in Chile, in the basement, a guest from the party finds a man being tortured. The detachment between the repression and the well-dressed gathering exposes the corrupted soul in the world of letters. In *2666*, the critics are not interested in the women killed in the forsaken city of Santa Teresa, but in finding Archimboldi, the subject of their intellectual endeavors. The theme is introduced on page 181: "Then Espinoza remembered that the night before, one of the boys had told them the story of the women who were being killed" (137).³³ The novel, thus, functions as a sort of prolongation of *The Savage Detectives*. The first chapter describes the boredom of the city, a type of cultural wasteland. The critics are engaged in a love triangle while they search for this writer who disappeared in Mexico, like a contemporary Ambrose Bierce. In a way, we are taking part in a literary game of our own by looking for "Roberto Bolaño" and the meaning of his works, like a Borgesian puzzle of labyrinths and mirrors. We are also recreating the search for the fictional writer revered by critics who have unlimited time to look for the writer with whom they have been obsessed for some time. In *2666*, Bolaño constructs another novel using again the myth of a "great writer" being pursued by other minor writers, while at the same time his fame continues to grow. At the end of the first part, Espinoza asks: "So why haven't we found him?" (158),³⁴ and Pelletier responds: "That doesn't matter. Because we've been clumsy or because Archimboldi is extraordinarily good at self-

concealment” (158).³⁵ Archimboldi may be the great famous writer that Bolaño is becoming, but he knows that this is not important, because what matters is the detective-like technique of trying to find someone that keeps our attention; finding him is really not the main purpose.

The book is divided into “reports” or “versions.” The first one is by the critics in search of the “intellectual father” who forged their careers. The second is by Amalfitano, a Chilean professor who lives in exile, was abandoned by his wife, and lives in fear that his daughter will be murdered in the city. In this part, we find adverse opinions about the academic study of writing: “literary careers in Spain are for social climbers, operators, and ass kissers, if you’ll pardon the expression” (174).³⁶ Or about Santa Teresa: “The University of Santa Teresa was like a cemetery that suddenly begins to think, in vain. It also was like an empty dance club” (185).³⁷ From the epigraph, Santa Teresa/Ciudad Juárez is presented as a “desert of boredom,” a city with a lack of infrastructure, where crimes against women are not investigated or prosecuted. The foreigners that end up in the city start becoming interested in the killings.

Fate, for example, an African American journalist covering a boxing match, becomes concerned with the assassinated women. In this section, the narrator recalls that during the 1871 Paris Commune, many people were killed, but no one complained. Yet in that same year, when a knife sharpener killed his wife and mother, the news was all over France. Therefore: “The ones killed in the Commune weren’t part of society, the dark skinned people who died on the ship weren’t part of society, whereas the woman killed in a French provincial capital and the murderer on horseback in Virginia were. What happened to them could be written, you might say, it was legible” (267).³⁸ This could be read as one of the themes of the second part of the novel: the necessity to write about the crimes that no one writes or cares about because they are not part of society or the “legitimate people.” Noam Chomsky, adapting the Orwellian notion of the *unpeople*, has written about those who are not fit to join history: “The strange breed of unpeople can be found everywhere, including the U.S.: in the prisons that are an international scandal, the food kitchens, the decaying slums” (n.p.). Society does not concern itself with the death of the unpeople. In the next fragment, the theme of the novel arises—the “muertas,” the young girls raped and killed: “Most of them are workers at the maquiladoras. Young girls with long hair. But that isn’t necessarily the mark of the killer. In Santa Teresa almost all the girls have

long hair, said Chucho Flores . . . But according to the legend, there's just one killer and he'll never be caught" (287).³⁹ Indeed, one of the only suspects detained in real life was an Egyptian, Omar Sharif Latif, who was prosecuted and died in jail, even though he always claimed his innocence.

The fourth part of the novel, "The Part about the Crimes," is perhaps the most macabre and the most commented. This part, which describes the crimes like a necropsy from a morgue, could be interpreted as a way of talking about the crimes that Mexican authorities do not want to discuss. The retellings also represent police reports that were not investigated and remain ignored. One crime after another is described in detail: the way the women were raped and tortured, the position of the body, or the state of the corpse. Then, in the middle of long paragraphs, a line appears such as: "There were no deaths in July. None in August either" (375).⁴⁰ The novel also introduces the Mexican journalist Sergio González Rodríguez, who has written extensively, including in his book *El hombre sin cabeza* (2009), on the women killed in Juárez and also on the recent drug violence in Mexico. The first of only two direct mentions of Ciudad Juárez (the other is on page 629) refers to the origin of one of the secondary characters: "The bigger of these was from the state of Jalisco. The other was from Ciudad Juárez, in Chihuahua" (388).⁴¹ Bolaño was aware of the crimes committed in Juárez. Tellingly, in an interview, he refers to Ciudad Juárez as an infierno: "it is our curse and our mirror, the restless mirror of our frustrations and our infamous interpretation of our freedom and our desires."⁴² In a personal email conversation with González Rodríguez, he talks about his interactions with Bolaño and how he became a character of the novel:

Roberto knew quite well the theme of the murders of women in Ciudad Juárez, and I know he read *Huesos en el desierto* (Bones in the desert) while he was preparing his novel. We maintained an email correspondence relating to the subject: he was interested in knowing details about the background and border environment, drug traffickers, their uses and customs, criminals and weapons and vehicles used. The victims were another one of his obsessions. As far as I understand, Roberto wanted to rebuild the horror of the shocking murders. Between 2666 and *Huesos en el desierto* there is a link and spectral proximity. (Personal email)

In González Rodríguez's *Huesos en el desierto*, written as nonfiction with extensive journalistic work and interviews on the border, we also

find explicit examples of the murders in Juárez. He mentions, at the end of the book, that he was tortured in Mexico City as revenge for denouncing the lack of action by Mexican authorities. With respect to *Huesos en el desierto*, Bolaño writes: "It's a book not in the tradition of adventurers, but apocalyptic, which are the two living traditions in our continent, perhaps because they are the only ones that set us close to the abyss that surrounds us" (*Entre Paréntesis*, 215).⁴³ Unwanted international attention and lack of criminological infrastructure to confront the piling up of murder cases became a humiliating story for the government. Perhaps the real killers knew about the lack of criminal scrutiny and used this gap to operate in the city without restrictions.⁴⁴

In the novel, the police are lost in a labyrinth of Byzantine proportions, trying to figure out the crimes. For example, in the following paragraph, a group of policemen discusses the many levels of penetration to a body. Instead of producing real forensic work, they are consumed by absurd speculation:

There was one cop, however, who said a full rape meant a rape of all five orifices. Asked what the other two were, he said the ears. Another cop said he'd heard of a man from Sinaloa who raped seven ways. That is, the five known orifices, plus the eyes. And another cop said he'd heard of a man from Mexico City who did it eight ways, which meant the seven orifices previously mentioned, call it the seven classics, plus the navel, where the man from Mexico City could make a small incision with his knife, then stick in his dick, although to do that, of course, you had to be out of your tree. (461)⁴⁵

This passage is horrific, but there is also parody of the police officers' injudicious conversations. The following passage could also be read as a premonition of deadlier times to come. When Haas is in jail, and he is flapping his arms and walking back and forth in the cell, one of the inmates asks him to be quiet and shouts: "And who is going to kill me, you gringo son of a bitch?" (481).⁴⁶ Haas responds:

Not me, motherfucker, said Haas, a giant is coming and the giant is going to kill you. A giant? asked the rancher. You heard me right, motherfucker, said Haas. A giant. A big man, very big, and he is going to kill you and everybody else. You crazy ass gringo son of a bitch, said the rancher. For a moment no one said anything and the rancher seemed to fall asleep again. A little while later, however, Haas called out to say he heard his footsteps. The giant was coming. He was covered

in blood from head to toe and he was coming now. The mercantile lawyer woke up and asked what they were talking about. His voice was soft, sharp and frightened. Our friend here has lost his mind, said the rancher's voice. (482)⁴⁷

This is perhaps the most terrifying part of the novel, the premonition of a giant of death, maybe a foretelling of the more than 10,000 people killed in the following years as victims of the drug wars, like a lyrical prophecy of the massacre that the city was about to suffer. A hotel receptionist (who has seen all of David Lynch's movies) tells Fate in another paragraph: "Every single thing in this country is an homage to everything in the world, even the things that haven't happened yet" (339).⁴⁸ The city, therefore, becomes a crystal ball of the horror to come.

Rather than a detective story, where criminals are typically found and arrested, *2666* can be called a "criminal novel," because the police never appear to be doing their job, thus inaugurating a macabre new genre. They spend much of their time telling misogynistic jokes about women. For example, one of them defines women as "a vagina surrounded by a more or less organized bunch of cells" (552)⁴⁹; how many parts can you divide the brain of a woman "Depends how hard you hit her" (552)⁵⁰; women cannot count to seventy "because by the time they get to sixty-nine their mouths are full" (552)⁵¹; and so on, in almost three pages of denigrating jokes. This could be taken as one of the ingrained causes of the killing of women in Juárez: the corruption of society at all levels and the disregard for women's lives. There have also been several cases since women began being murdered in Ciudad Juárez, where politicians and religious leaders have blamed the women themselves for their way of dressing, or for their being the "instigators" of their own murder. In the novel, the death sentence to their case is the following: "the case was soon shelved" (526).⁵² All the cases seem to suffer the same destiny, as they are archived, lost, forgotten in the labyrinth of bureaucracy⁵³: "Being a criminologist in this country is like being a cryptographer at the North Pole. It's like being a child in a cell block of pedophiles" (578).⁵⁴ In Mexico, the novel suggests, you get used to everything, the inability of the authorities to prosecute crimes, the disregard for order and swift justice. The last case reported in the novel took place in 1997, another woman killed, raped, mutilated, and her body found in the desert, but "both this case as the previous case were closed after three days of generally halfhearted investigations" (633).⁵⁵

In the last part, “The Part about Archiboldi,” we learn that Klaus Haas has become a principal suspect in the killings of women. He is the nephew of Hans Reiter, later known as Archiboldi, who goes to Mexico to help his nephew. We also learn about Leo Sammer’s story, which was told to Hans Reiter when they were both in jail. Sammer’s crime consists of being instrumental in the massacre of a group of Greek Jews who arrive at a small town by mistake on a train headed to a concentration camp during World War II. After following orders to kill them all, he methodically buries them on the outskirts of town. At one point, they run out of places to bury them and the bodies lie everywhere, the surrounding fields bursting with cadavers. The connection between the Holocaust and the killing of women in Santa Teresa addresses the problem of evil, which works through different parts of the history of humanity. Is Karl Haas the only culprit of the killings, just like Sammer? Impossible, but he may have his share of guilt.

In her essay on *2666*, Donoso Macaya studies the connections between Bolaño’s aesthetic and politics, finding a link between the disappeared in Juárez and the Chilean repression during Pinochet. The use of repetition to describe the crimes is compared to the photographs of the disappeared as a way of insisting to the government that their faces are present and have not been erased by the state. She writes: “Bolaño’s fiction opens in *2666* a possible territory for meeting certain forms of systematic violence, femicide and genocide, and in which a particular relationship between politics and evil is updated” (138).⁵⁶ Genocide and femicide are present in the novel to exemplify the origins of evil and violence.⁵⁷ Bolaño finds a connection between repression in the Southern Cone and the northernmost border of Latin America. Violence permeates the region, with disappearances and torture. There is also a connection to Europe during the Holocaust. For Bolaño, violence is inherent to the human soul, but it is important to contextualize the structure of violence, as in the case of Santa Teresa/Ciudad Juárez, and to raise a voice about the women and men killed.

The themes and characters could be exponential in an extensive novel like this one (Mammoth-novel, Bolaño called it), but I will draw this essay to a close, even so. In regards to the name of the writer, one night, Lotte, Archiboldi’s sister, sees a group of shadows; this composition resembles the paintings by Giuseppe Arcimboldo, the Italian sixteenth-century mannerist painter who used fruits and vegetables to compose head portraits for the Hapsburgs as a way to

ingeniously criticize the rich with his visual puns. Rather than flattering the subjects, he turned them into salads:

One night, Lotte saw shadows listening to the radio. One of the shadows was her father. Another shadow was his mother. Other shadows had eyes and noses and mouths that she didn't recognize. Mouths like carrots, with peeling lips, and noses like wet potatoes. They all had their heads and ears covered with kerchiefs and blankets and on the radio a man's voice said Hitler didn't exist, that he was dead. (866)⁵⁸

2666 could be read as a composite of different parts that make a single view of reality. Conceivably it is not so grim as the theme of the novel, but a literary game or puzzle by using the name of Arcimboldo (also written Arcimboldi). Returning to the bleakness and premonitions of the novel, on another night, Lotte Haas has a premonitory dream related to the giant of death mentioned in jail by Karl: "She dreamed of a cemetery and the tomb of a giant. The gravestone split and the giant's hand rose up, then his other hand, then his head, a head crowned with long blond hair caked with dirt" (889).⁵⁹ This monstrosity or giant could symbolize a person loathed by mankind, the symbol of bullies, thugs, mass murderers and tyrants, most always representing evil and savagery. Is it possible that Klaus may be one of the mass murderers or a wrongly accused foreigner? The "long blond hair full of dust" could be a sign of the foreignness of the giant, or of the structure of violence that acts in the city, an angel of death that comes from under the earth.

In sum, in *The Savage Detectives* we have the setting for Bolaño's world, the construction of the metropolis of letters in Mexico City, the efforts of turning himself into a poet, while at the same time bombarding the literary establishment, a sort of extreme, guerrilla-like "anxiety of influence." We also have the visceral realists searching for Cesárea Tinajero (Cesárea in Spanish is the c-section, an operation to give "literary birth" to Arturo Belano?). In *2666*, the quest is now for Benno Von Archimboldi, a German novelist who is a Nobel Literature contender. The scholars follow him to the ninth circle of hell, to the town of Santa Teresa in the north of Mexico, where the crimes against women take place, in a well-oiled femicide machine. But the Archimboldi scholars show disregard for the horror around them in their "intellectual" quest. *2666* is Bolaño's masterpiece, a novel that continues his reflections on violence, witty literary detectives in search of lost writers, piercing their heads in the abyss of the

unknown, the blank page, and taking the risk of becoming a relevant writer, in the context of violent times and a century of murders from Chile to the last border in Latin America: Ciudad Juárez (Santa Teresa), the once-most-dangerous city in the Western Hemisphere.

Notes

* “Con la cabeza en el abismo” translates as “With his head in the Abyss,” a paraphrase of his statement: “¿Entonces qué es una escritura de calidad? Pues lo que siempre ha sido: saber meter la cabeza en lo oscuro, saber saltar al vacío, saber que la literatura básicamente es un oficio peligroso” (“Entre paréntesis,” 36).

1. The longer translations are by Natasha Wimmer (see Works Cited). The smaller lines from the book are my responsibility, and they do not have page numbers in the notes.
2. There has been considerable production on this theme. In novel: *Desert Blood* (2005), by Alicia Gaspar de Alba. In chronicle: *Las muertas de Juárez* (1999), by Víctor Ronquillo; and *Huesos en el desierto* (2002), by Sergio González Rodríguez. And Juárez: *The Laboratory of Our Future* (1998), by Charles Bowden, which includes photographs by photo journalists from Ciudad Juárez; and *El silencio que la voz de todas quiebra: Mujeres y víctimas de Ciudad Juárez* (1999), edited by Rohri Benítez. There is also a movie: *Bordertown* (2006), with Jennifer López and Antonio Banderas, and several documentaries: Lourdes Portillo’s *Señorita extraviada* (2001) and Alejandra Sánchez’s *Bajo Juárez: la ciudad devorando a sus hijas* (2006).
3. There could be many interpretations to this number; it could be two times the number 666 that contains cabalistic force, referring to the number of the beast, to apocalyptic times, or the sum of all the verses of the Bible, or the years that passed after the creation of earth. In *The Savage Detectives*, Cesárea Tinajero talks about the times to come, stating: “allá por el año 2600. Dos mil seiscientos y pico” (597). In *Amuleto*, the character Auxilio Lacouture talks about a cemetery: “del año 2666, un cementerio olvidado debajo de un párpado muerto o nonato” (77).
4. According to Adriana Cavarero’s definition of modern violence, the term “horrorism” comes from the etymology of “horripilante”—that which raises your hair, to bristle with fear. The neologism “horrorism,” apart from typical consonance with terrorism, is meant to emphasize “the peculiarly repugnant character of so many scenes of contemporary violence” (29).
5. “saber meter la cabeza en lo oscuro, saber saltar al vacío, saber que la literatura básicamente es un oficio peligroso” (Paz Soldán 39).
6. Bolaño always considered himself a poet, and poetry influenced not only the characters of his novels, but also his style. For an excellent study of his poetic style and the long sentences in *2666*, see Enrique Salas-Durazo (2012) in the Works Cited.

7. "Dentro del inmenso océano de la poesía distinguía varias corrientes: maricones, maricas, mariquitas, locas, bujarrones, mariposas, ninfas y filenos. Las dos corrientes mayores, sin embargo, eran la de los maricones y la de los maricas. Walt Whitman, por ejemplo, era un poeta maricón. Pablo Neruda, un poeta marica. William Blake era maricón, sin asomo de duda, y Octavio Paz marica. Borges era fileno, es decir de improviso podía ser maricón y de improviso simplemente asexual. Rubén Darío era una loca, de hecho la reina y el paradigma de las locas" (83).
8. "No fui a casa de las Font. Estuve todo el día cogiendo con Rosario" (97).
9. "Todo el día deprimido, pero escribiendo y leyendo como una locomotora" (97).
10. "ya comienza a crecer una pequeña biblioteca producto de mis hurtos" (104).
11. "Este país es una desgracia, eso hay que reconocerlo, la literatura de este país es una desgracia, eso también hay que reconocerlo" (153).
12. "¿Quién es Archiboldi? Dijo Piel Divina. Ay, estos real visceralistas realmente son unos ignorantes. Uno de los mejores novelistas franceses, le dije, su obra, sin embargo, casi no está traducida al español" (170).
13. "Lo que bien amas nunca perece, dijo uno que estaba junto a nosotros y que nos oyó, un güero de traje cruzado y corbata roja que era el poeta oficial de San Luis Potosí, y ahí mismo, como si las palabras del güero hubieran sido el pistoletazo de salida, en este caso de despedida, se armó un desorden mayúsculo, con escritores mexicanos y nicaragüenses dedicándose mutuamente sus libros" (341).
14. "Cuando yo llegaba me lo encontraba en la puerta de la casa, sentado en las escaleras o en el suelo, con una camiseta del América que apeataba a sudor, bebiéndose su TKT y dándole a la lengua con sus amigos, un grupito de adolescentes que lo llamaban poeta" (346).
15. "Un chileno si tiene buenos brazos y no es flojo, sobrevive en cualquier parte" (385).
16. "Descartes, Andrés Bello, Arturo Prat, los forjadores de nuestra larga y angosta franja de tierra" (389).
17. "como buen chileno las ganas de progresar me corroían los huesos" (392).
18. "pero como buen chileno me resistí a la ignorancia y me puse a leer y leer" (395).
19. "¿Ha oído hablar alguna vez de la teoría de la isla de Pascua? Esa teoría dice que Chile es la verdadera isla de Pascua, ya sabe, al este limitamos con la cordillera de los Andes, al norte con el desierto de Atacama, al sur con la Antártica y al oeste con el océano Pacífico" (395).
20. "Durante un tiempo la Crítica acompaña a la Obra, luego la Crítica se desvanece y son los Lectores quienes la acompañan. El viaje puede

ser largo o corto. Luego los Lectores mueren uno por uno y la Obra sigue sola, aunque otra Crítica y otros Lectores poco a poco vayan acompañándose a su sigladura. Luego la Crítica muere otra vez y los Lectores mueren otra vez y sobre esa huella de huesos sigue la Obra su viaje hacia la soledad. Acercarse a ella, navegar a su estela es señal inequívoca de muerte segura, pero otra Crítica y otros Lectores se le acercan incansables e implacables y el tiempo y la velocidad los devoran. Finalmente la Obra viaja irremediamente sola en la Inmensidad. Y un día la Obra muere, como mueren todas las cosas, como se extinguirá el Sol y la Tierra, el Sistema Solar y la Galaxia y la más recóndita memoria de los hombres. Todo lo que empieza como comedia acaba como tragedia” (484).

21. “Disciplina: escribir cada mañana no menos de seis horas... Por la mañana escribir, por la tarde corregir” (491).
22. “Miedo al fracaso y al ridículo. Pero sobre todo miedo a ser malos. Miedo a habitar, para siempre jamás, en el infierno de los malos escritores” (903).
23. “Ya sabía que escribir era inútil. O que sólo merecía la pena si uno está dispuesto a escribir una obra maestra” (984).
24. In *Estrella distante*, the character arrives to a similar conclusion: “Esta es mi última transmisión desde el planeta de los monstruos. No me sumergiré más en el mar de mierda de la literatura. En adelante escribiré mis poemas con humildad y trabajaré para no morir de hambre y no intentaré publicar” (138).
25. “No tengo mucho tiempo, me estoy muriendo” (989).
26. Los desiertos de Sonora.
27. “un mexicano visto desde arriba” (574).
28. “Una sábana extendida” (609).
29. “Cuando despertamos estamos en Santa Teresa” (568).
30. Translation by Robert Lowell, *The Atlantic Monthly*, 1961. Web.
31. The following quotes from *2666* in English are by Natasha Wimmer. The page number in the essay corresponds to the English version and the Spanish page number is given in the corresponding note. “un enorme campamento de gitanos o de refugiados dispuestos a ponerse en marcha a la más mínima señal” (149).
32. “En México, y puede que el ejemplo sea extensible a toda Latinoamérica, salvo Argentina, los intelectuales trabajan para el Estado. Esto era así con el PRI y sigue siendo así con el PAN. El intelectual, por su parte, puede ser un fervoroso defensor del Estado o un crítico del Estado. Al Estado no le importa. El Estado lo alimenta y lo observa en silencio... Un intelectual puede trabajar en la universidad o, mejor, irse a trabajar a una universidad norteamericana, cuyos departamentos de literatura son tan malos como los de las universidades mexicanas... los intelectuales *siempre* creen que se merecen algo *más*” (161).

33. "Espinoza recordó entonces que durante la noche pasada uno de los muchachos les había contado la historia de las mujeres asesinadas" (181).
34. "¿Y por qué no lo hemos hallado?" (206).
35. "Esto no importa. Porque hemos sido torpes o porque Archiboldi tiene un gran talento para esconderse" (207).
36. "la carrera de las letras en España está hecha para los arribistas, los oportunistas y los lameculos, con perdón de la expresión" (224).
37. "La Universidad de Santa Teresa parecía un cementerio que de improviso se hubiera puesto vanamente a reflexionar. También parecía una discoteca vacía" (239).
38. "los muertos de la Comuna no pertenecían a la sociedad, la gente de color muerta en el barco no pertenecía a la sociedad, mientras que la mujer muerta en una capital de la provincia francesa y el asesino a caballo de Virginia sí pertenecían, es decir, lo que a ellos les sucedía era escribible, era legible" (339).
39. "La mayoría son trabajadoras de las maquiladoras. Muchachas jóvenes y de pelo largo. Pero eso no es necesariamente la marca del asesino, en Santa Teresa casi todas las muchachas llevan el pelo largo—dijo Chucho Flores... Pero la leyenda quiere que el asesino sea uno solo y además inatrapable" (363).
40. "En julio no hubo ninguna muerta. En agosto tampoco" (470).
41. "El más corpulento de ellos era del estado de Jalisco. El otro era de Ciudad Juárez, en Chihuahua" (486).
42. "Es nuestra maldición y nuestro espejo, el espejo desasosegado de nuestras frustraciones y de nuestra infame interpretación de la libertad y de nuestros deseos" (Braithwaite 69).
43. "Es un libro no en la tradición aventurera sino la tradición apocalíptica, que son las dos únicas tradiciones que permanecen vivas en nuestro continente, tal vez porque son las únicas que nos acercan al abismo que nos rodea."
44. "Roberto conocía bastante bien el tema de los asesinatos de mujeres en Ciudad Juárez, y sé que leyó *Huesos en el desierto* mientras él preparaba su novela. Mantuvimos una correspondencia por correo electrónico referida al tema: le interesaba conocer a fondo y en detalle el entorno fronterizo, los narcotraficantes, sus usos o costumbres criminales y las armas y vehículos que usaban. Las víctimas eran otra de sus obsesiones. Hasta donde entiendo, Roberto quería reconstruir el horror de los asesinatos en su ascenso estremecedor. Entre 2666 y *Huesos en el desierto* existe un vínculo tan estrecho como espectral."

What follows is the rest of my conversation with González Rodríguez:

Si mi libro trata de reconstruir lo acontecido, Roberto reinventó literariamente todo aquello. Desde luego, yo aspiro a que mi libro sea leído como una contraparte en términos de

documentos o indicios respecto de su gran novela. En 2666 la sección que se llama “La parte de los crímenes,” sigue el programa de narrar cada uno de los homicidios acontecidos en un lapso. No puedo dejar de pensar que yo mismo como escritor, como periodista, me he convertido ya por la escritura de Roberto en un personaje de su novela y al mismo tiempo en alguien que oscila en dos dimensiones: la realidad de todos los días y la que él creó, donde me asignó un papel sin fin. En cualquier caso, se trata de una influencia mutua tan intrigante como perdurable, cuyo dispositivo proviene de su imaginación.

Conocí a Roberto Bolaño en el año 2002. Desde 1999 intercambiamos correos electrónicos sobre el tema de Ciudad Juárez, que Roberto conocía muy bien. Por amigos comunes, Roberto supo de mí y, como buen lector que era, quiso leer mis libros antes de enviarme el primer correo. A veces se exasperaba porque no le respondía sus correos: resulta que éstos no me llegaban (mis comunicaciones están intervenidas y a veces sujetas a sabotaje desde que investigo los asesinatos de mujeres en Ciudad Juárez). Cuando fui a presentar mi libro *Huesos en el desierto* a Barcelona, pude visitarlo en su casa de Blanes. Fue cuando me comentó que en su próxima novela aparecía yo como personaje con mi nombre real. Me vio sorprendido y dijo: “voy a plagiarle la idea a Javier Marías que ya te incluyó en su novela *Negra espalda del tiempo*.” Años atrás, Marías me puso en su tejido novelístico como un “corresponsal” que indagaba el destino aciago del escritor Wilfrid Ewart en México. Roberto reía y fumaba, feliz de compartir una travesura o un juego intertextual. No estoy del todo seguro de que Roberto haya estado en el norte del país. Quizás si llegó a visitar Gómez Palacio, en el estado de Coahuila, ciudad capital-dual con Torreón. Y de allí transfiere sus recuerdos (o imaginaciones) a Santa Teresa, Sonora (localidad ficticia para 2666). Roberto no estuvo en Ciudad Juárez hasta donde yo sé. Supongo que por razones de licencia novelística decidió convertir a Ciudad Juárez en Santa Teresa: quería abrir un campo narrativo propio sin tener el peso de lo real de Ciudad Juárez (que por lo demás yo había examinado en *Huesos en el desierto*). Lo que sí es incuestionable es su conocimiento de la Ciudad de México. Yo nací y he vivido siempre en la capital mexicana, y el tiempo que Roberto estuvo en México compartimos, sin conocernos, lugares, trayectos, personas conocidas, en general, el “espíritu de la época.” Él era poeta, yo tocaba en un grupo de rock. Quiero pensar que nuestro encuentro estaba predestinado para realizarse tres décadas después. Sin el México espiritual o imaginario que Roberto inventó para sí y que ahora conocemos en sus novelas, su obra

- sería inexistente. O, por lo menos, carecería de la potencia y singularidad que ahora tanto admiramos en él.
45. “Hubo un policía, sin embargo, que dijo que en una violación completa era la que se hacía por los cinco conductos. Preguntando sobre cuáles eran los otros dos, contestó que las orejas. Otro policía dijo que él había oído hablar de un tipo de Sinaloa que violaba por los siete conductos. Es decir, por los cinco conocidos, más los ojos. Y otro policía dijo que él había oído hablar de un tipo del DF que violaba por los ocho conductos, que eran los siete ya mencionados, digamos los siete clásicos, más el ombligo, al que el tipo del DF practicaba una incisión no muy grande con su cuchillo y luego metía allí su verga, aunque, claro, para hacer eso había que estar muy taras bulba” (577).
 46. “¿Y quién me va a matar, pinche gringo, tú?” (603).
 47. “Yo no, hijo de la chingada, dijo Haas, va a venir un gigante y el gigante te va a matar. ¿Un gigante?, dijo el rancharo. Tal como lo oyes, hijo de la chingada, dijo Haas. Un gigante. Un hombre muy grande, y te va a matar a ti y a todos. Estás loco, pinche gringo, dijo el rancharo. Durante un instante nadie dijo nada y el rancharo pareció dormirse otra vez. Al poco rato, sin embargo, Haas dijo que escuchaba sus pasos. El gigante ya estaba en camino. Era un gigante ensangrentado de la cabeza a los pies y ya se había puesto en camino. El abogado mercantilista se despertó y preguntó de qué hablaban. Su voz era suave, astuta y asustada. Aquí el compañero se ha vuelto loco, dijo la voz del rancharo” (603).
 48. “Cada cosa de este país es un homenaje a todas las cosas del mundo, incluso a las que aún no han sucedido” (428).
 49. “un conjunto de células medianamente organizadas que rodean una vagina” (690).
 50. “depende de lo duro que le pegues” (690).
 51. “porque al llegar al 69 ya tienen la boca llena” (690).
 52. “El caso se archivó” (720).
 53. *Presunto culpable* (2009, Roberto Hernández Geoffrey), a film about the corrupt justice system in Mexico, shows that even the innocent have problems to prove their case. Therefore, if being alive and healthy is not enough to defend oneself against a corrupt system, what future is there is for the dead to find justice?
 54. “Ser criminólogo en este país es como ser criptógrafo en el polo norte. Es como ser niño en una crujía de pedófilos” (723).
 55. “Tanto este caso como el anterior fueron cerrados al cabo de tres días de investigaciones más bien desganadas” (791).
 56. “Bolaño inaugura en la ficción de *2666* un territorio posible para el encuentro de formas determinadas de violencia sistematizada, el femicidio y el genocidio, y en el cual se actualiza una relación particular y específica entre la política y el mal.”
 57. For a study on the discourse of evil in Bolaño, see Daniuska González in the Works Cited.

58. “Una noche Lotte vio a una sombra escuchando la radio. Una de las sombras era su padre. Otra sombra era su madre. Otras sombras tenían ojos y narices y bocas que ella no conocía. Bocas como zanahorias, con los labios pelados, y narices como patatas mojadas. Todos se cubrían la cabeza y las orejas con pañuelos y mantas y en la radio la voz de un hombre decía que Hitler ya no existía, es decir que había muerto” (1085).
59. “Soñó con un cementerio en donde estaba la tumba de un gigante. La losa se partía y el gigante asomaba una mano, luego otra, luego la cabeza, una cabeza ornada con una larga cabellera rubia llena de tierra” (1113).

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Part III
Short Novels and Short Stories





Chapter 6

Valjean in the Age of Javert: Roberto Bolaño in the Era of Neoliberalism

Nicholas Birns

Bolaño and His Time

Roberto Bolaño (1953–2003), whose work began to receive recognition in the Spanish-speaking world by his winning major prizes in the late 1990s, gained worldwide fame after his death. A truly global writer, he was born and grew up in Chile, spent many of his formative years in Mexico, and lived the latter part of his life in Spain—indeed, Catalonia. Moreover, as Wilfrido H. Corral has recently shown in *Bolaño traducido*, his popularity in the English-speaking world, and his affinity for it, is such—along with the skill of his translators Chris Andrews and Natasha Wimmer—as to have made him virtually an honorary writer in English, even so as to cloud the reputation he had already acquired in the Spanish-speaking world: “His rise and influence continue so accelerated that it has become accepted that his immersion in this global literary dynamic is due to having sold his image by means of Anglo-American marketing. To see things this way is to diminish his status as a writer recognized widely and earlier in the Spanish-speaking world.”¹ Yet the role that Bolaño’s politics have played in all this is still undefined.

For all the only occasionally punctuated consensus about his eminence, there is no consensus about Bolaño’s politics, explicit or implied. Often more involved in the depiction of concrete politics and radical movements than his Boom predecessors (though there are some exceptions like Julio Cortázar’s *Manual for Manuel* and Mario Vargas Llosa’s *The Real Life of Alejandro Mayta*), unabashedly progressive in sympathy, the work of Bolaño nonetheless gained canonicity in a time dominated worldwide by neoliberal rhetoric of free-market doctrines and whatever conservative cultural and aesthetic



doctrines were needed to legitimize them. Moreover, despite his progressive political positing, Bolaño often seems to caricature revolutionary movements and makes clear that he is a champion of aesthetic independence who does not write from a doctrinaire position. Jean Franco accuses Bolaño of “writing through a moonscape of political and social disaster” (707) to which his only answer is narrative “illusion” and “tease.” Though Bolaño is not a conventional Leftist, nor does he feel a deep historical connection to previous icons of the Latin American Left, this essay nonetheless contends, *pace* Franco, that the effect of his novels is a sharp, although not utopian, opposition to neoliberalism. This essay, which focuses on *By Night in Chile*, *Distant Star*, some of the short stories in *Last Evenings on Earth*, and some of the essays and memoirs in *Between Parentheses*, and touches on other aspects of Bolaño’s vast oeuvre as needed, argues that Bolaño’s art is fired by a passionate discernment of the threat posed by the contemporary Right, the devastating and corrosive reverberation it has had on imaginative expression, and the limited, yet calculable, role of literature in quelling these reverberations. Furthermore, it argues that Bolaño sees the contemporary Right as both continuous and discontinuous with previous Rights, and that he viewed the September 11, 1973, overthrow of the Allende government in Chile as not just the beginning of a dark time for his country of birth (much as the Tlatelolco massacre was for Mexico in 1968, as portrayed in Bolaño’s *Amulet*), but the point of origin of a revived Rightist ideology that had widespread consequences for the world at large.

Toward the end of *Distant Star*, Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables* is mentioned in the context of the police detective Simon Romero. Romero recalls reading the book in his youth, but only remembers the episode of Javert’s suicide. Though Romero, as a detective, is vocationally more on the side of Javert, he is an Allende sympathizer imprisoned and then self-exiled under Pinochet. His values are also far more on the side of Valjean’s altruism and compassion than Javert’s strict enforcement of the rules. Romero does not remember Javert’s suicide out of identification with him, but because this suicide was an acknowledgment that the values held by Javert during his life and career were seen by the narrative as empty and maleficent. In Romero’s world, though, the Javerts, now not the detectives but the criminals, are not remorseful but still rampant, literally in the case of Wieder who, though hiding, is still, in the early 1990s, on the loose. Bolaño shares Hugo’s general worldview and his sense that aesthetics and politics mix in the same brew—unlike Vargas Llosa, and despite his own idiosyncratically aesthetic inclinations, he is not divided between

Hugo and Flaubert—but he lacks the earlier writer’s optimism. *Les Misérables* may picture Valjean and Javert as equal antagonists; it understands Javert has the authority of the police beside him, but Hugo’s novel unequivocally sees history as tending toward the ideals of Valjean, even if those ideals are only incipiently to be fulfilled in the character’s lifetime. Javert may have greater force in synchronic terms, but Valjean commands the diachronic spectrum within the fiction—the novel has no doubts not only that Valjean is morally superior but that, even if not immediately, his vision of life is bound to win. In Bolaño’s world, the Javerts not only have the force but also the temporality, as is signified by the name of Carlos Wieder, the malevolent signal-poet of the early months of the Pinochet regime whose surname means “return” or “again” in German. Unlike Hugo’s picture of a Javert associated with force and order, Wieder uses the traditionally Leftist weapons of subversion and avant-garde art to consolidate the hold of the new Rightist regime and to wipe out those who resist or are opposed to it.

Wieder’s skywriting poetry is at once inscription of power and portent of calamity. Though in a way both *By Night in Chile* and, more directly, *Distant Star* can be seen as sequels to *Nazi Literature in the Americas*, they all make two-tiered points: first of all, that there are Nazi, or the slightly more palatable late-twentieth-century equivalent writers, and secondly, that there *need* to be Nazi, or the equivalent, writers, from the point of view of the leaders of Nazism or equivalent ideologies. This can be seen in how, in *Distant Star*, Wieder, the Futurist daredevil-aesthete, in his aviator’s bravado reminiscent in different ways of Gabriele D’Annunzio and Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, is subcontracted by the regime, or acting on his own proregime recognizance, to kill the Garmendia sisters as well as many others. Like has to kill like. Only a poet can take out a poet. Wieder is like an aesthetic counterinsurgent, taking out the guerrillas because unlike the regular army, he knows their means. Writers like Hugo in the nineteenth century could presume that people of art and sensitivity were reformists, and that agents of repressive state power were by definition unimaginative. Bolaño shows imagination, in the form of Wieder, being expropriated and reengineered by the authoritarian state. These “re-” words are no accident when juxtaposed with a character whose adopted name contains the overt “re-” element of Wieder. Wieder is not just violent, but violent again, this time in the service of poetry; he is not just a poet, but also a poet again, this time in the service of violence. In both *métiers*, it is a new paradigm.

If, as Wieder proudly and oracularly proclaims, “resurrection is death” (82), it is because in his discourse resurrection is the death of conventional hope, the instrument of an art, an awareness, an aspiration turned against itself. Similarly, the Pinochet regime did not see itself as simply another traditionalist dictatorship, a customary embodiment of *caudillismo*. The Pinochet regime combined authoritarianism with, in economic terms, an utter rejection of *dirigisme*, an embrace of what the economist Gary Becker termed “widespread deregulation, privatization, and other free market policies for closely controlled economies” (n.p.). What came to be called “neoliberalism” was, although hearkening back to earlier free-market discourses, something new that can compete with self-conscious modern ideologies such as Marxism. It is what David Harvey calls “the neoliberal state” and defines as “an apparatus whose fundamental mission was to facilitate conditions for profitable capital accumulation on the part of both foreign and domestic capital” (3). Harvey goes on to say that the first experiment in neoliberalism occurred “after Pinochet’s coup . . . against the democratically elected government of Salvador Allende” (3), the pivotal event in the traumatic unfolding Sharae Deckard calls “the changed historical situation of Latin America in the era of millennial capital” (n.p.) that is the background for Bolaño’s novels.

Neoliberalism as Ideology

This sense of conscious innovation and counter-Marxism in early neoliberalism can be seen in *By Night in Chile*, where the priest-literary critic, Sebastián Urrutia Lacroix, is engaged by the Pinochet regime to provide tutorials in Marx’s *Das Kapital* to its leaders, both in a conventional sense so that the regime can know its enemy, to “understand Chile’s enemies” as the General puts it (100), and also inferentially so it can buttress its own ideology with the sort of interpretive force that they recognize as possessing. In a crucial passage, Pinochet congratulates himself on being more of a reader than his three immediate and democratically elected predecessors: “I’m always reading and writing. All the time. Which is more than you could say for Allende or Frei or Alessandri” (100). Whether socialist, Christian, Democrat, moderate, or conservative, all these predecessors fall short of Pinochet’s self-assigned literacy, which he wields as cultural capital in the same quasi-sentimental way that Hugo associated his own art, and its buffeting by state power, with the tribulations of Jean Valjean. A couple of pages later, Urrutia, in attempting to return to literary

criticism after the coup, mentions “Victor Hugo, for God’s sake” (102). This is an index of Hugo’s obviousness as literary referent. But it is also a tacit acknowledgment of how Urrutia had strayed not just from Hugo’s ideals, but also from the novelist’s presuppositions about history—optimistic, democratizing, teleological. After his tête-à-tête with Pinochet, Urrutia is “no longer at peace” (“no estoy en paz” in the original), reminiscent, whether accidentally or deliberately on the part of author or translator, of the line “no longer at ease” in Eliot’s “Journey of the Magi,” the difference being that the Magi have seen Christ, Urrutia only the false god of, in the end, his own ideological devising. Indeed, much of the imagery of Urrutia’s life, such as his interest in falconry, is a parody of Christianity, a falcon being an inversion or displacement of the dove associated with the Holy Spirit, and its use to kill doves and pigeons may represent the role of the church as fellow traveler, or ally, of the dictatorship.

Urrutia is an enemy to progress, compassion, and humanity. Hugo, despite his full recognitions of the obstacles to such in his lifetime, postulated these as ultimately prevailing in the form of the ideals of Valjean. Bolaño, not just out of a different personal sensibility but also in and of his time, cannot. Today, art can be on the side of, or can be wielded by, evil. This is confirmed in *By Night in Chile* by the horrific María Canales episode that more or less closes the novel. Interestingly, there is a connection here between a misappropriated art and violence against women, foreshadowing a theme that is to reach its apex in the Santa Teresa/femicide section of *2666*. The signal here with respect to *By Night in Chile* is the leitmotif of Sordello (not Robert Browning’s Sordello, nor Ezra Pound’s but Sordello himself), the troubadour who stands both for the intrinsic ideals of art and for a certain poetic idealization of women. The murder of the beautiful young Garmedia twins by Wieder, the poet, is the inverse of this, a poet not placing women on a pedestal but deliberately practicing violence against them. It is as if violence against women were part of this countercreative process, this rededication of ideals to ends opposite to those for which they are originally conceived. That Urrutia calls for a return to the “troubadours” (104) after his interview with/tutelage of Pinochet is another ironic register for this. In other words, it is not as if the mere iteration of referents such as Marx or Hugo or the troubadours could operate as a mantra to dispel evil; evil can just as well use these terms as rhetorical covering with which to cloak itself. The same is true of Christianity, which Urrutia, spurred by *Opus Dei* and its specific desire to manifest Christianity not as such but particularly *within modernity* and *by modern means*,

similarly perverts or at least torques. Nothing is immune to the uses of the malintentioned.

Interestingly, although in Bolaño's novel Pinochet wants to at once replace Allende and be a better student of Marx than this avowed Marxist, Pinochet seems to reserve his particular ire at the predecessor with whom he has the greatest ideological affinity, Jorge Alessandri: "President Alessandri read romances. Romances, I ask you. What do you think of that?" (98). Pinochet may be scorning the emotionalism inevitably involved in even the worst written romance, but there is more here. Alessandri is pictured as a traditional sort of Rightist political figure—indeed highly traditional, in that his father was also president of Chile—whereas Pinochet is an innovator, a man who thinks outside the box. The paleoconservative Alessandri's non-intellectual reading practices render him fodder for the ridicule of the neoliberal, many of whose policy positions are in fact the same, but who surrounds himself with a rhetoric of innovation and an aura of ideology borrowed or appropriated from the very Marxism his self-justifying posture so excoriates. Unlike Javert, there is no rhetoric of legality here. Pinochet delights in being transgressive and innovative; he does not speak in the tone of someone merely committed to preserving the anterior order and its rigid formalities. He is not a classicist, but a postmodern. He is using the allure of reading and writing books—as Lenin, Stalin, and Mao did—to buttress his power, another reason why he needs to read Marx.

Part of the goal here is to use this rhetoric to consolidate power. In *Distant Star*, the regime only needs Wieder for the initial few months when it cannot be sure it is entirely in control; although herald of its menace, in terms of the regime's long-term plans he is only a transitional figure. Similarly, Urrutia is only window-dressing of the takeover, only momentarily employed as a kind of court intellectual for the new junta, then left to drift back to the literary pages and placidly call for a return to the classics, the celebration of the "eternal life of the great books"² that Corral pointedly sees as just what Bolaño is *not* doing in his own criticism. This is less, as might be supposed, Bolaño faulting or fearing an aesthetics that aloofly holds its head above politics than an indication of how aestheticism can be used by anyone, performed by anyone, and thus is ultimately dispensable.

The question arises with respect to the severely flawed protagonists of these two short novels centering on the aftermath of the Pinochet coup, of Bolaño's own position. Even though he is clearly championing, as it were, the ideals of Valjean in the time of Javert, it is not a melodramatic championing, a simple exposure of the evil

from the vantage point of the good; Bolaño's perspective is not exemplary enough for epic or even discernible enough for satire despite the strong satiric element in all his work. He recognizes that the status of Urrutia or Wieder as *hommes de lettres*, though highly different from his own, is not entirely other. After his disappearance, Wieder publishes in small magazines equivalent to those in which Bolaño published before his late surge to fame. Urrutia's posture about Neruda is similar to Bolaño's, as seen in the latter's "Dance Card" in *Last Evenings on Earth*, which is simultaneously admiring and irreverent toward the Nobel Prize-winning poet—respectful of his indubitable greatness in the Chilean literary pantheon, but chiding of a certain political naïveté in his public positions and concerned about Neruda's eminence occluding other additionally deserving Chilean writers. Even in *Distant Star*, where the presence of the Bolaño-surrogate narrator serves to distance the book's perspective from the miscreance of Wieder, there is no romanticization of the "good" writer's role just because he is a writer. As Gene H. Bell-Villada has pointed out in *Art for Art's Sake*, this idealization of the writerly mission still inhabits twentieth-century avant-garde postures even though the content of romanticism, Parnassianism, and idealism—in Spanish American terms, the legacy of *modernismo*—is long gone. The content of a writer's work was no longer expected to be uplifting and inspirational, but nonetheless writers such as Borges, Beckett, Nabokov, and the Boom writers were, in their posture as writers, romanticized, made into heroes. Some have tried to do this even with Bolaño himself; but his fiction resists this canonization in its very grain.

Is any writing in a dark time corrupt, or can an ironic observation of that darkness serve as a mode of resistance? Bolaño is sufficiently skeptical to have his fiction raise this question, and this skepticism extends to the point where he punctures any potential lionization of his literary persona. This is political and postmodern on his part, but it is not because postmodernity has brought us to a more authentic political sensibility, but because it has featured such hideously inauthentic political identities as to make the writer's romanticization impossible. In other words, Bolaño is not congratulating himself on his more jaded and cynical view of the writer; it is as much tragic necessity as superior insight. Bolaño's acrid bitterness may be an anti-neoliberal gesture.

Thus there are marked differences between Wieder's sensationalism and Bolaño's acerbity, between Urrutia's dutiful canonicity and Bolaño's insatiable curiosity about other writers. For all that Bolaño is corrosive about *the literary world* as such, he makes frequent

references to fellow Latin American authors in his fiction and no contemporary collection of literary essays is as full of *enthusiasm* as *Between Parentheses*. The way Bolaño in *Between Parentheses* doles out praise rather generously to writers whom even the most hardened aficionado would have to look up illustrates his is not, as Voltaire would put it, a pococurruantist canon, one that only allows in a few privileged writers. Urrutia's canon looks similar, but it is in fact different; only the obvious names, chosen for their obviousness rather than for any deep affect or insight the critic has into them. Urrutia's belletristic approach puts literature on a pedestal; Bolaño's pugilistic essayism makes literature an arena of contest in which true appreciation is savored because it is earned.

In *By Night in Chile*, Urrutia's critical superficiality is visible in his periodic calls to return to the classics. They are also manifest in his overly dogged and insincere discipleship to the critic Farewell—the name is in English in the original and is based on Hernán Díaz Arrieta, whose pen name was “Alone”—a man of conventionally Hugoesque progressive and optimistic assumptions to which the new era, as it were, says Farewell. Urrutia uses Farewell as an entrée to the literary world but then disparages and perverts his values. Yet it is in the difference not just between Urrutia and Farewell but between Farewell and Bolaño that the interstices become interesting; Bolaño may sneer at Urrutia's opportunism but he does not want to go back to the old safeties of Farewell. Bolaño's excoriation, in *Between Parentheses*, of such writers, termed “born paper-pushers” (110) as Antonio Skármeta, for his media-friendly literary persona, and Volodia Teitelboim (112), for his old-fashioned Leftism, is, in isolation—Bolaño is of course tremendously positive about other Leftist writers in *Between Parentheses*—just the sort of essay one could imagine Urrutia writing, say for *El Mercurio* in the early 1980s, perhaps by José Miguel Ibáñez Langlois, a.k.a. Ignacio Valente, the original for Urrutia Lacroix. This is not at all to say that Bolaño and this character are similar. Teitelboim is limned by Bolaño as the kind of rigid Leftist that is such a caricature as to be incapable of offering any effective resistance to neoliberalism, and also as someone as absurdly establishmentarian as Octavio Paz is imaged in Bolaño's *The Savage Detectives*. But Bolaño and his character Urrutia cannot be melodramatically opposed. The web neoliberalism itself weaves is too tangled. In the time of neoliberalism, neither author *nor audience* can avoid contamination. (Here, Franco's sense that the quests in Bolaño's fiction for lost or hidden authors are parallels for the reader's quest for Bolaño packs some punch, and one that is as, or more, unsparing of

the audience as of Bolaño.) Is a priest teaching Marxism to Pinochet somewhat the novelist himself addressing his neoliberal readership?

Bolaño's enthusiasm for all different sorts of writers only reminds us that they nonetheless exist within a literary world. Even though he is closer to misidentifying with than identifying with these literary miscreants, Bolaño does not declare an absolute distance from them. First of all, he recognizes that, as with Raoul Delorme's "barbaric writer" in *Distant Star* or the "visceral realists" of *The Savage Detectives*, a parody of the "infrarealists" with whom Bolaño himself was once associated, people of Leftist political affiliation, can use literature for purposes that are farcical, that the literary field is a fungible one in which absolute ideals are hard to maintain. As Corral puts it, Bolaño "has a basic distrust of self-righteous reaction from any side of the political spectrum" (48). In a Foucauldian way, Bolaño and those he excoriates are in the network, part of the shared problem, rather than one being the solution to the other. Joaquín Manzi, in comparing the principles of arrangement in Bolaño's novels to assemblages in postmodern art, gets the side-by-side aspect here. Manzi also likens the world of Bolaño to that of Foucault. Perhaps in the world of Victor Hugo or Sordello things are different, but not here and now.

Many have seen Bolaño's turn to fiction as either commercially inspired in order to support his family in the wake of his illness or out of a desire to reach as wide an audience as possible. But why he turned from what was by all accounts his first love—poetry, imaged here by the troubadours—to fiction lay in the latter's ability to depict "the planet of the monsters" (*Distant Star* 130), the realm in which these novels are directed. (Thus Laura Healy [translator into English of Bolaño's poetry], not Chris Andrews or Natasha Wimmer, might be the translator of his "truest" work.) As Bolaño states in *Between Parentheses*, "No one in the world is as brave as a poet" (117). This confidence harkens back to the unfettered lyricism of the troubadours. This is not to say that Bolaño thinks poetry can literally conjure a nonmonstrous world, nor that Bolaño's own actual poetry is especially lyrical—it is as gritty and visceral and disillusioned as his fiction, although importantly it does have the *affective honesty* of the troubadours—but that fiction by its very premise is better able to overtly confront it. Art is not redemptive, it can coexist with evil. Being a poet does not mean one is ethical or has superior insight. Such an ascetic standpoint necessarily leads to a deprivileging of, at least explicitly, the writer's perspective. We see the denudation of the sacral aura of "the writer." What Wendy Lesser calls Bolaño's "stringent, hard-nosed sympathy" (n.p) is as close to a median point on

the aesthetic, ideological spectrum limned here, but it is not a point that deems itself able to arrogate any perspective redemption other than its gaunt testimony, its vivid witness. Bolaño does not allow the reader the satisfaction of any sort of happy ending, explicit or inferential. Indeed, we have here not “the author,” not even “the implied author,” but, conjecturally, “the implied textual witness.”

Names and Clues

We need though to return to Pinochet, as depicted in *By Night in Chile*, and his three democratic predecessors. We have necessarily talked about Allende, the Marxist reformer whose perceived radicalism was the premise for the junta’s actions, and about Alessandri, the intellectually unimposing romance-reader. But we have barely mentioned Eduardo Frei Montalva, the Christian Democrat who was Chile’s president from 1964 to 1970 and who died in 1982, very likely murdered by the Pinochet junta. Yet Frei comes into the story in a roundabout way. The key here is to regard the names Bolaño so lightly drops. Before the skywriting-poet adopts the name Carlos Wieder, the narrator had known him as a fellow literature student, Ruiz-Tagle (the same person switches easily between the two identities). The Ruiz-Tagle name is instantly recognizable to any Chilean, for Frei’s wife—the first lady of Chile for six years—was María Ruiz-Tagle Jiménez (see Kohut xxx). To have a character operative in 1973–1974 named Ruiz-Tagle is like having a character in a US novel set in 1967–1968 having the surname “Bouvier” (the maiden name of Jacqueline Kennedy). The Ruiz-Tagle referent becomes all the more overt in the 1990s, when Frei’s son became the second president of post-Pinochet Chile with his *apellido materno*, Ruiz-Tagle, being all the more manifest as a way of distinguishing him from his still-famous father. Though the name Ruiz-Tagle is overdetermined as referent, a storied history in Chilean society, furnishing several prominent figures including an early and brief holder of the presidency, certainly this highly recent iteration is the one intended to have an impact on the reader.

Does it mean that Ruiz-Tagle has become Wieder? The resonance is twofold: that democracy can turn authoritarian, but also that the manifestation of Wieder involved a *transition*; Ruiz-Tagle as a referent reminds us that there was once good, in the same way as the American playwright Rinne Groff’s drama *Jimmy Carter Was a Democrat*, set in 1981, does. Wieder has, as José de Piérola puts it, privileged his aesthetic vision so as to make a moral compromise (247), and the

juxtaposition with the Ruiz-Tagle referent makes this ethical taint all the more clear. Thus Frei Montalva's presence is indirectly evoked through his wife's surname, and—as a moderate, someone who could not at all be labeled a Marxist radical, yet was a victim of the dictatorship—the barbarity of the Pinochet regime is made manifest.

That Bolaño is using this sort of referent in this hint-filled, clue-like way is confirmed by the story "Sensini" in *Last Evenings on Earth*. Here, the mysterious writer Sensini's most famous book is entitled *Ugarte*, in the internal frame referring to "about a series of moments in the life of Juan de Ugarte, a bureaucrat in the Viceroyalty of the Rio de la Plata at the end of the eighteenth century" (2), who is a character in the 1956 novel *Zama* by Antonio Di Benedetto, an Argentine writer who entered literary contests in Spain and is (see Corral, *Bolaño traducido* 67) the model for Sensini. But for the Chilean or even international reader it clearly refers to the *apellido materno* of the Chilean dictator himself: Augusto Pinochet Ugarte (Kohut xxx). The point of this referent in the story is not to say that Sensini is a crypto-fascist or to indict his writing but, again, to differentiate the postmodern writer and the postmodern political milieu, to prevent any Hugoesque idea of the writer in exile upholding the ideals of their society. Wieder is out "to show the world that avant-garde art and the new regime were not at odds; quite the contrary" (77). These are just the traits that Corral notes when he describes Bolaño's last public appearance as one in which the author was "ironically sarcastic about the literary world that heaped praise upon him" (Corral, "Roberto Bolaño" 51).

Bolaño is fully aware that, despite all, literature can embody positive values. Ignacio López-Vicuña puts it well when he observes, "Although for Bolaño literature is not a civilizing force, it can be a testimony to a profound malaise in our civilization."³ Literature will thus have to do without the reassurance provided by the association of the valor of the writerly mission with what López-Vicuña terms "the possibility of any idealization of the epic struggle of the Left."⁴ That the cognomens of Chilean politicians are slipped into names of writers and novels within Bolaño's fictional world signifies that this cynicism is based on a sense that, in this era, writers, whatever their wishes, can never be decisively segregated from the conditions that surround them. Even though the aesthetic of magical realism, with its insistence on the indissolubility of the link between the mundane and the imaginative, might be said to have affirmed this as well, Bolaño's stance implicitly accuses magical realism of adhering to a vestigial romanticism that is of no use in the era of neoliberal dictatorship and

its successor and joint-stockholder, neoliberal democracy. As Deckard puts it, Bolaño was frustrated by the way Latin American writers “continued to produce debased versions of magical realism chockfull of exotic stereotypes of Latin America for export—dictators, patriarchs, sexy ghosts, and flying women” (n.p.) and sought to differentiate his fiction from that mode as well as what Deckard calls the “programmatic rebellion” (n.p.) of the Crack and McOndo movements, to which Bolaño was too old to belong anyway, both movements being very much comprised of those born in the 1960s who, unlike Bolaño, had experienced their adulthood completely under neoliberalism.

But what specifically is Bolaño’s grievance against magical realism? Is he not writing magical realism because magical realism was naïve to think it could evade neoliberalism, or because magical realism no longer matters in neoliberalism, or magical realism has been co-opted by neoliberalism? As Corral observes, there is a decisive difference between Bolaño and earlier “notions of mastery” (“Roberto Bolaño” 51) in Latin American letters.

Bolaño’s puncturing of these notions of mastery is seen in his short story “Mauricio ‘the Eye’ Silva,” where queer themes rise to the forefront. Mauricio, who reveals to the Bolaño-like narrator in their Chilean youth that he, Mauricio, is homosexual, realizes that his identity will outrage not only conservatives but also those on the Left, who reacted “just like their enemies on the Right” (*Last Evenings on Earth* 107; a concern also seen in Bolaño’s poem “Ernesto Cardenal and I”). Mauricio seeks distance from Chile, but cannot really find it, seeking sanctuary in Argentina but finding “ill winds blowing in the neighboring republic” (106), whose post-1976 dictatorship was if anything even worse than Pinochet, and trying to avoid violence even though “real violence is unavoidable” (106). Mauricio’s sojourns take him to India, where he rescues two young castrated boys from a gay brothel. This altruistic defense of the victimized is resistance by other means; indeed, Mauricio is one of the few individuals presented by Bolaño who succeeds in being straightforwardly heroic (though Juan Stein and Diego Soto in *Distant Star* are seen as heroic in their ultimately futile resistance to the dictatorship). Despite the violence that overcomes his charges at the end, Mauricio’s altruism has mattered; it is not just the index of postrevolutionary futility that critics such as Franco suppose. That he, and those he defends, are queer signals that the accustomed sexual scenarios that the Left, in adhering to scenarios of Valjean-like valor, has privileged may need be complemented by others, that the nascent Javerts of the world have captured the

“straight” metanarrative so that the queer one is placed in the position of countervalance. As demonstrated by the femicide motif shown with the Garmedia sisters in this book and Santa Teresa in 2666, contemporary evil is bound up with a renascent heteronormativity, a savage machismo more frightening now that it is not just the norm but a contestant in a slew of identity-based ideologies.

Respite and Perspective

Mauricio tells the narrator this story in Girona, the city in Catalonia where the narrator lives. Most of the short stories, indeed, are narrated from places on or near the Catalonian coast and consist of adventures remembered by the narrator or by others visiting him there; such is also the case in *Distant Star*, where Romero comes to the Catalonian coast to put the missing pieces in the grim story of Wieder. Similarly, in *Distant Star*, it is mentioned that, in 1977, a war-game relating to the War of the Pacific between Chile, Peru, and Bolivia is being played on the Catalonian coast. The long-festering national rivalry between Chile and Peru, the stakes over the capture by Chile of the Peruvian ship *Huáscar*, the performance of Admirals Grau and Prat are all played out in a simulacrum, much as it occurs with the greater arena of World War II in Bolaño’s *The Third Reich*. But the point is that these simulacra can be played out on the Catalonian coast (the narrative wryly points out that both Grau and Prat were actually Catalan in descent) in a zone of relative safety; that war-game can only be played amid at least the illusion of peace. That the war-game is most likely authored by Wieder, and that the very idea of reenacting a war pays into the malevolent “re-” motif signaled by Wieder’s *nom de plume* (or skywriting plane), is an indication that all is not benign with the war-game. The war-game represents, to use Marx’s famous phrasing, being repeated in farce, or, in a Baudrillardian sense, the simulacrum perverting meaning through iteration. But the effect of the tableau of the latent malignity is to show how benign the Catalonian coast is on its own. In “Anne Moore’s Life,” a US woman whose peregrinations during the 1960s brought her to Mexico and in contact with Mexican friends of the Spain-situated narrator, who, from his vantage point, attempt to make sense of her life-trajectory.

In *Between Parentheses*, Bolaño speaks of Blanes, the Catalonian coast town where he lived during the final decades of his life, as a “paradise attained” (249). That this uncompromisingly cynical writer speaks with such affection, with unaffectedness about what was, in

effect, his hometown, is notable. Bolaño may be, as Corral has commented, a nomad. But he was one that settled down eventually, and in any event even nomads have burial grounds, the organic body of a Delusion nomad or a literal, Attila-the-Hun type may be rhizomatic, but in death they are inevitably situated and ensconced. If there is ever a Bolaño festival, it will be in Blanes, much as a Faulkner one would be in Mississippi or even a Borges one in Buenos Aires; Blanes rather than Santiago or Mexico City. And the perspective leverage offered by the respite of Blanes is important to Bolaño's achievement, much as, in the work of W. G. Sebald, to whom, in canonicity and quality if not necessarily in affect, Bolaño is often compared, rural East Anglia offers a respite from the traumas of war and resettlement his fiction traces, so is Blanes a respite from dictatorship, brutality, and literary miscreance in Bolaño.

However utopian Bolaño was about Blanes in his nonfiction, though, in his fiction there are limits to its paradisiacal quality. First of all, as in the case of *Wieder*, it is all too easy for evil, or the report or reverberation of evil to reach there; it is not insulated, secure. Second, there is a futility, a poignant, bittersweet sense of aftermath to the Catalonian coast referent in Bolaño: it cannot register anything more than a slightly compensatory grace note. Indeed, it can often be the stage for the delayed effect of trauma. Importantly, the province of Girona, in which Blanes is located, is the closest part of Spain to coastal France and to the land of the troubadours and their Provençal milieu. The zone of ultimate lyric truth, of Sordello, is in at least geographical terms only a step away. Third, the reader of Bolaño must admit that the compensatory world of Blanes is set in the context of the prosperity of the democratic Spain of the 1980s and 1990s, a prosperity occasioned by and concomitant with neoliberalism; Bolaño might be seen here as rejecting the brutality of neoliberalism's founding gestures, but not the comfortable world that it has made. Equally, though, one might see Blanes as a kind of intermediate staging-point, albeit within a neoliberal vortex, for the series of reappraisals and rescue missions that Bolaño's narratorial surrogates conduct in the Latin American past. *Between Parentheses*: Somewhere between the infinitely postponed but celebratory finale of García Márquez's *Love in the Time of Cholera* and the ambiguous messianism made famous by Walter Benjamin, Blanes and its Catalonian coast neighbors stand as a compensatory site of incomplete healing.

In "Sensini," the narrator meets the author of *Ugarte* through submitting stories to the same prize contests held by municipalities on the Catalonian coast. Importantly, the narrator does not enter the

essay contests, which require expository prose specifically directed at the subject of the municipality of Alcoy (though the real Bolaño eventually writes well about Blanes in *Between Parentheses*). The fiction prize, though, can go to a story on any subject, and it is through entering this contest that he and Sensini, an exiled Argentine, encounter each other. Even though Spain, and certainly Catalonia, had its own traumatic past as recently as the Spanish Civil War and the Franco dictatorship, which ended short years before Bolaño came to Spain, it is Latin America that is the land of pain; Spain, and this particular locale, is the land of perspective, analysis, reflection. Though Bolaño mentions the Spanish Civil War, for instance, in “Dance Card,” it is World War II, and Nazism in Germany in particular, that is the source of twentieth-century trauma, as seen in *The Third Reich, 2666*, and *Nazi Literature in the Americas*; Spain itself is seldom seen this way. Spain is indeed somewhat privileged as a site of globalization, or of what Raúl Rodríguez Freire, in “La orilla latinoamericana,” calls the “extraterritorial” but refuge, sanctuary. Latin America is the site of past trauma; Spain (or Catalonia) the site of present-day repose, reflection, and piecing together the mysteries of the narrator’s life and those who are his comrades, doppelgangers, or foils. This does not mean that there are no adventures or disturbances in Spain—as seen in “Days of 1978” in *Last Evenings on Earth*, the Chilean exile community in Spain is fully capable of generating these. But in general Spain exists as a serene backdrop for considerations of crimes and horrors that occurred elsewhere.

The details here do not accuse the writer of vicariousness or distance with respect to his extreme material; one would have to say Bolaño’s is the next best actual stance to actually being a participant in these events, which few writers have survived being. Yet there is coziness in the narratorial perspective being paired with the Catalonian coast as a kind of armchair vantage point. There is a cozy, Anglophile side to Bolaño, as represented by his praise of Helene Hanff’s *84 Charing Cross Road* in *Between Parentheses* (234, where Hanff is described as “admirable”). Blanes is Bolaño’s equivalent of the fictional English village of St. Mary Mead in Agatha Christie’s Miss Marple detective stories, a secure place from which the detective can investigate the crimes of others. The epigraph from Chesterton—author of the Father Brown detective stories, and of course a Borges favorite—in *By Night in Chile* is pertinent here. This again reminds us of Sebald, whose work would not be the same without the rural enclaves of Norfolk and Suffolk encapsulating the ravages of the German-speaking diaspora amid the world wars. Importantly, Bolaño gravitated to inconspicuous Blanes,

not Madrid or Barcelona, just as Sebald stayed away from London or even Cambridge and lived in secluded Norfolk. The point is not just that they avoided the hustle and bustle of city life, but that they swerved away from the exclusively metropolitan or global, toward environments that were more like enclaves. Grant Farred is correct when he says that Bolaño “constitutes a politics that is not dependent on—as much postcolonial thinking is—the restorative, the redemptive, or the testimonial” (702). But in a minor, epilogue-like way, Blanes expresses a small, partial, minute recompense for “winter readers” (*Between Parentheses* 118), living in what the German Romantic poet Friedrich Hölderlin termed a *dürftiger zeit*, a fallow time.

Thus it would be a mistake to see this as complacency here; just as many readers, intentionally or not, see Bolaño as more complicit with the neoliberal consensus than he actually is. Many wish to celebrate a Bolaño whose unstinting insight into contemporary barbarism in reality makes them flinch because he seems to be directing his literary ire against a convenient antagonist. Equally, Bolaño’s wide cultural reach, his cosmopolitan knowledge of many European and American literatures, does not yoke him complaisantly to tradition. Thus Urrutia’s *Mittleuropäisch* nostalgia—apt for an Opus Dei priest—cannot be ascribed to Bolaño, and it must be understood that the historical resonance with respect to Archimboldi in *2666* (to the painter Arcimboldo, patronized by the Holy Roman Emperor Rudolf II) is not intended as auratic. Any solace in Bolaño’s work does not come from past institutional authorities or present-day ideologies, but from the minor compensations of the Catalonian coast and what it represents for the author.

That Bolaño has attained, for a Latin American writer of his level of uncompromising difficulty, what Franco calls, sarcastically, a “rapturous critical reception” (207) speaks to a felt need for a full confrontation with neoliberalism’s dehumanization of moral subjectivity, its division of the world into undeserving winners and undeserving losers, its desensitizing to death and suffering, its blurring of the line between dictatorship and democracy. Bolaño is no Valjean, sacrificing himself so that the cause can go forward. But his unflinching acknowledgment of his own circumstances, his gesturing toward what Rodríguez Freire, in “La orilla latinoamericana,” calls a Leftist mode of memory, gives some hope that the foul betrayals represented, say, by a Carlos Wieder will, in the future, not return. Eschewing the grandiloquence of the traditional Left, Bolaño eviscerates neoliberalism from within; but it is an antagonistic and charged evisceration.

Notes

* For Eduardo Frei Montalva (1911–1982).

1. “Su ascenso e influencia siguen tan acelerados que se ha llegado a creer que su inmersión en esa dinámica literaria global se debe a vender su imagen por medio de una mercadotecnia anglosajona; y ver así las cosas es obviamente disminuir su valor como autor reconocido mucho antes y ampliamente en el mundo hispanohablante” (9).
2. “vida eterna de grandes libros” (28).
3. “Si bien para Bolaño la literatura no es una fuerza civilizadora, sí puede ser un testimonio del profundo malestar en nuestra civilización” (199).
4. “posibilidad de cualquier idealización épica de la lucha de izquierda” (207).

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Chapter 7

Literature and Proportion in *The Insufferable Gaucho*

Brett Levinson

One of the central themes addressed in Roberto Bolaño's literature is, of course, literature. Bolaño's harsh and parodic attacks of facile but celebrated writers, of the marketing of authors, of reading groups, academic criticism, contests, prizes, and, in general, the literary establishment are legion. Famous examples include the first portion of *2666*, in which European professors in London beat a Pakistani taxi driver nearly to death for reasons that include the man's refusal to cite Borges; and the portrait of the protagonist of *By Night in Chile*, the Opus Dei priest and critic Sebastián Urrutia Lacroix, who rises to the top of the Chilean literary scene despite or because of his ties to the far Right.

Yet a rejection of the institution of literature is not a comment on literature itself. In fact, Bolaño expresses great faith in the act of writing, linking it repeatedly to heroism. He champions Borges, no less.¹ Yet he demonstrates a predilection for valiant "failed" authors, who often die young or commit suicide, whose brilliant works—if published at all—go unread or unrecognized by a commercialized and corrupt culture. The Mexican Mario Santiago (represented by Ulises Lima in *The Savage Detectives*), founder with Bolaño of the 1970s "infrarrealista" movement, is here a prototype; so is Juan Stein of *Distant Star*, the wonderful poet and teacher who, banished or disappeared by the Pinochet regime, surfaces again and again—either as myth or man—in Leftist movements throughout Latin America and elsewhere. A romantic and avant-garde kernel, linking revolution and poetry (even if the link is known, by the author, to be illusory), lies at the core of Bolaño's otherwise difficult-to-place project.



Bolaño, then, seems to draw a clear line between authentic literature and writing that reduces itself to mere publication and publicity. Yet, if Bolaño posits this division in his essays and observations, he does not actually strive to delineate or define it, at least not in his own fiction. He in fact refuses to offer models of *either*. For instance, in *Nazi Literature in the Americas*, one finds no passages of Nazi literature. Likewise, no extracts from Stein's poetry appear in *Distant Star*, nor any (titles of novels aside) from Archimboldi in *2666*. There is good reason for the absences. If the field of the literary is split between compromised publicity and near indigestible intervention, an illustration of the difference, precisely because an *illustration*, falls on the side of publicity, hence deletes the partition that it strives to highlight.

The difficulty in play is staged explicitly toward the conclusion of *By Night in Chile*. A literary gathering takes place in a private home throughout the dictatorship. Simultaneously, in the basement, a man is chained to a bed, a victim of the CIA-affiliated husband of the hostess. Members of the salon eventually gain awareness of the situation; yet the meetings do not cease. After the dictatorship, Urrutia Lacroix recalls, using indirect speech, a statement of the fictional hostess-writer María Canales: "she said that is how literature was made in Chile" (115; translation modified).² When, a bit later, Urrutia Lacroix repeats the declaration, he does so with direct speech, in his own words, in the present tense; and he universalizes the declaration. This is how literature *is* made in Chile, Guatemala, Mexico, Spain, France, Germany, England, Italy; this is how all great Western literature is made: "That is how literature is made . . . Or at least what we call literature, to keep ourselves from falling into the rubbish dump" (116).³ It is not literature, the statement implies, but the nonsense that we call literature, which is "made in this fashion." And the *literarti* label such rubbish "literature" for a particular reason: to avoid slipping themselves into the garbage bin. For, if literature goes, so too do its functionaries. Canales seems to discredit the literary production of the Pinochet regime. Urrutia Lacroix's recollection alters the assertion so that it covers, first, all national literatures; then all great literature; and finally, it would seem, literature as such. Is the cynicism directed at a particular literary landscape of a singular Chilean context, or at writing itself?

In his reading of *By Night*, Patrick Dove raises a similar question. Highlighting just how clichéd is Bolaño's portrait of a prisoner cuffed to a bed by a CIA agent in Santiago, Dove asks: does Bolaño's own writing perhaps also fall within the domain that is "made in

this fashion,” namely, the Chilean literature that is built atop and by virtue of the horrors of the dictatorship? (150). “Made in this fashion,” here, means that the literature is produced, not as literature, but as spectacle, aestheticism. The literature of the dictatorship stages the period in such a way that the realities are rendered consumable. Events appear as epiphenomenal images, as that which did not *truly* happen (or happen quite “like that” or for that reason) or that happened by accident—without rational cause, the incidents are assured not to repeat themselves: we are safe—due to abnormalities or monsters rather than “us,” exemplary or true Chileans, who are hence not responsible. In the salon, removed from public space, writers can either ignore or be critical of dictatorship since, either way, such representations separate them, and their readers, from the Pinochet regime as fiction is to reality. “That is how literature was made”: literature fed off the dictatorship, which in turn was sustained by literature. Canales’s judgment, then, appears no less aestheticist than the artistic milieu it critiques as it distances present-day writers from that very milieu. In fact *By Night*, as previous analyses have shown, is as much about the role of the postdictatorship *in* the dictatorship as it is about the actual dictatorship years (Dove 151). Placing the Pinochet epoch into the past, the democratic transition that follows permits the economic, political, and cultural structures that the dictatorship installed not only to survive but to normalize themselves. The golpe reverberates long after the military departs. Bolaño emphasizes the point by having his protagonist reproduce the Canales statement, at least the first time he does so, in an ambiguous manner: “dijo que así se hacía la literatura” (*Nocturno* 146). The translation is either “she said that was how literature was made” or “she said that is how literature is made” (the second choice is the one taken by the actual *By Night* translator, Chris Andrews). The Chilean present and past weave through one another. Future generations inherit accountability, not for the past, but for the golpe’s *presence*. Alleging to break from it, the literary works of the “now” pertain to the gestures of the “then.”

These points would, or at least could, hold just as well for *By Night* itself. For what could be more agreeable to the contemporary reader/writer than a text that ridicules a literary universe or political culture embodied by the dismal Canales and the fascist Urrutia Lacroix? Does Bolaño’s novel’s mockery not also license individuals (e.g., literary critics in the United States) to set themselves off from “despotism” when it is precisely this “setting off” that props the thing ridiculed? Is anything more aestheticist than work that, in the name of politics, scoffs at the aestheticism of *other* literature, politics, criticism?

In *Distant Star* the spectacular art of the fictional agent of the dictatorship, Carlos Weider, replicates the spectacular Left-leaning, anti-Pinochet verse of an actual poet, Raúl Zurita. Bolaño raises the question as to whether “all things literary” are not, today, aestheticism and marketing. Bolaño is not criticizing Zurita. Via Zurita’s literary experiments, he is asking whether literature is still conceivable. Bolaño’s fiction in fact arises as so many detective mysteries in search of the same hero and criminal: literature. Such an investigation concerns neoliberalism as well. One is familiar with the argument that postdictatorship transitions to democracy, in the Latin American Southern Cone (and elsewhere), represent mere shifts into the neoliberal policies that, in fact, founded those regimes. Third World capitalism completes, albeit with (in fact, by virtue of) less *physical* violence, the systems of despotic control that the military states established. It is no longer necessary to force national (and international) agreement, to quell rebellion, for agreement takes place without force, even without rhetoric or propaganda, as a matter of common sense. The neoliberal market and its cultural agents build an uncontested consensus. And commonsensical assertions—for example, that post-1989 democracy in Chile is at least an improvement over the dictatorship, hence that Chileans ought to continue the course (when the real concern is the way in which the separation of the two periods sponsors oppression)—play to this accord.

“Aestheticism,” here, occupies an important function. For among aestheticism’s tasks is to render common and comforting violence, struggle, and discord. If literature exists as something other than a cultural form that reproduces that which goes without saying, it does so as the disturbance of a sense of the world, the market, which converts in advance each such disturbance into a marketable sign, that is, into a reflection of convention. In *By Night*, the writing of Urrutia Lacroix (who represents the right), Canales (who represents the liberal), and Bolaño himself (who seems to represent resistance) appears to iterate, thereby further substantiate, the consensus. This looks to be how *all* literature is *now* made. No *saying*, but only reflections of the already *said*, remain. Yet is this true? Is literature, because a mere medium of consensus, now the performance of its own obsolescence?

Josephine, the Mouse Folk, Song, Memory

The collection *The Insufferable Gaucho* opens with an epigraph from Kafka’s “Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk”; and the story “Police Rat” represents an intertextual dialogue with the Kafka text.

Kafka's parable, of course, describes a diva around whose recitals, according to the first-person narrator, the "mouse folk" congregate in rapt attention. Though called a singer, Josephine does not actually sing. Singing is just the best description that the narrator can offer of her act. The mouse folk, in fact, have a tradition of song, though it now belongs solely to memory. It involves an extraordinary performance. Josephine's crooning is hardly similar, as it is very near to "piping," the most common noise that the mouse folk emit. Indeed, piping is so much a part of daily life that it vanishes into other components of mouse existence, above all, into the arduous work of survival that each community member relentlessly undertakes, and must undertake, else the community perish.

Josephine's art, nonetheless, is also, somehow, utterly distinct from the drone it resembles. The narrator, though, cannot name a single quality of Josephine's singing that separates it from the ordinary hum—save its weakness or quietness. Perhaps, the narrator conjectures, Josephine is just a poor or inexperienced piper whose expression, precisely because feeble or "off," recalls piping in general (the familiar premise is that daily instruments, such as voices, go unnoticed and underappreciated when they work well, revealing their importance only when they fail). Or maybe, he (or she) implies, Josephine is akin to the front person of a pop group who imitates in a banal fashion the most trite tunes, yet acquires a following, emerges as a star, gains more and more followers, and in short, becomes famous for being famous. The singularity of Josephine's performance, in any event, leads her to request exemption from more typical communal toil. No one else can do what she does; and her act is a key component of communal life. By all logic, the singing should thus "count as a job"—as opposed to the piping it almost mirrors, which no individual would confuse with productive labor.

One can list, then, six chief components of mouse society: singing (a thing of the past), piping, work, Josephine's art, reproduction, and the folk itself. Of course, to label Josephine's activity "art" is already to jump to conclusions. Never does the narrator say that Josephine is an artist. What then *is* Josephine doing? And how does her act complement or disrupt, perhaps define, the other facets of mouse life? By linking "piping" to what Heidegger labels *das Man*, the "they" or the "one," we begin to glean a response.⁴ Impersonal but passed down from generation to generation and person to person, Heidegger's "they-speak" emerges as the common sense of each individual. It consequently seems natural, like breathing, which is why it goes unheeded.

They-speak or piping, then, does not become itself by itself. A speaker sends a missive; and the message is grasped exactly as intended, since all folk within the particular common share the same sense. The prattle therefore operates as if it were the individual's property, one that the I fully commands, just as he operates his fingers. The speaker's statements are grasped by the Other according to the speaker's will (because no other sense is conceivable), affirming this speaker's control of himself and of his setting, his at-homeness in this environment. Or, stated in reverse, the Other's performance (the Other's proper understanding of the statement), because it conforms to the wishes of the I who speaks, discloses this I as a master of language and of relations, hence as a self-determined subject. The milieu of the community, piping, makes of the subject a sovereign (an absolute), even as he seems to exist relative to others. And if, in appropriating the common sense, the I acquires selfhood or a space in the community, he will repeat the operation. They-speak is made stronger with each use (as a tradition is made stronger when passed on), which in turn deepens the subject's capacity—the more powerful the common sense, the greater the ability of the self to reach others, extend itself—which yields increasing repetition, which strengthens the they-speak, which intensifies capacity, which improves the I's situation, in an endless circle. The "throng" (376) is not a mass that suppresses the subject, but the opposite: the collection that employs, accounts for, and offers a property to each individual. For the individual is just that: an I without any other quality except its I-ness, an I among other I's. In other words, through piping or common sense—which, fittingly, the narrator links to peace—the subject gains his status as subject, but at a price: complete alienation in the they.

The folk of "Josephine," then, is composed of individual pipers joined together, and reproduced as individuals, by the consensus that estranges them. Each subject ascribes to the collective movement, one that fends off danger, obtains food, and reproduces. The collective labor paves the way for individual survival, which permits the maximum efficiency of the collective, which saves the individual. The I of the mouse folk reproduces itself in order to continue reproducing itself. "Josephine" offers various passages that speak to the process; yet none does so more explicitly than one found in "Police Rat": "We live in a collective, and what the collective depends on is, above all, the daily labor, the ceaseless activity of each of its members, working toward a goal that transcends our individual aspirations but is nevertheless the only guarantee of our existence as individuals" (*Insufferable* 49).⁵

It is not surprising, then, that the folks in Kafka's parable generate offspring at an alarming rate, offspring that almost immediately procreates. The children, that is, are always already involved in the reproduction of society, enjoying little period of school (from the Greek *scholē*: leisure time) or play. This is because, however small and weedy he may be, a given child is always already piping, propagating the common sense that produces and sustains each member. One does not need to breed, even labor, to reproduce oneself. One only needs to open one's mouth.

We mentioned that, in the mouse folk's vocabulary, no word for Josephine's act exists. The diva's performances are absolutely uncommon. Yet they are apprehended in terms of a common notion: singing. Josephine therefore complains that nobody understands her; and she in fact is barely heard. Indeed, in the concluding paragraph the narrator asks whether the memory of Josephine's song might prove stronger than the "live" version. He or she even wonders if the seemingly live rendering was, perhaps, itself a memory. The narrator speculates, in other words, that Josephine's music was always already apprehended via the banal field of piping, thereby through the suppression and forgetting of the outstanding nature of the "thing" captured. If the latter be so, it is difficult to explain how and why Josephine convokes the folk. It would appear that Josephine pipes like every mouse; but no other mouse pipes like Josephine. The seeming contradiction is explained by the fact that Josephine's song is not a separate product with distinct qualities, an identifiable object for a discerning subject (such as the narrator). Her song is separation itself. It is the art of that which comes between subjects (the individual folk) and objects (piping, singing, work, reproduction), and between individuals and themselves. Thus, Josephine is a most adored *and* resented figure. She introduces discord into the piping and the pipers. But she also initiates the overcoming of discord: assembly, unity. Parting the sameness (separate *from* and a separate piper *within* the throng of piper) and joining the disparate, Josephine appends a back-and-forth, a *rhythm*, to the monotonous they-speak. Her song is the tuning of the piping. It thus matches the domain that, in the Heidegger of *Being and Time*, opposes they-speak, namely, "language."

For Heidegger, language names the irreducibility of communication to common sense.⁶ It takes place as and due to the contact between the voice of the I and the comprehension of the Other. If such "commerce" resulted from mere ordinary speech, there would in fact be no commerce. A "mouth" would not confront an "ear," since the two zones would share one space in advance, one indifferent

world: that of the I. The common sense of a community, in other words, does not for Heidegger bring two together via the word. It iterates the indivision of a perfectly efficient totality, admitting no translation, crossing over, or communication. Language is not common sense but its interruption.

To be sure, language, like Josephine's song, and like all mouse folk banter, makes use of piping as instrument. No communication of any sort takes place without consensus, tradition, ritual, convention, subjectivity. However, a particular usage or speech act includes also—at the very least—rhythm, accent, lexicon, speed, volume, tone, in short, style. And no measurable norms exist for style. One may correct a child for, say, "using a tone" when speaking. Yet all articulations contain a tone; and no rules that teach the youngster exactly "how much tone" he should deploy in a given circumstance can ever be offered since every tone is too much tone. (Similarly, any accent is too much accent, since an accent exists in excess of signification, common sense.) Therefore, a specific articulation or piping practice neither imitates nor transgresses the common sense, the way in which an articulation is (or would be, ideally) most easily understood. Rather, it interleaves a "too," a kind of static, or an incalculable and asemiotic tuning into the common. It installs a rift that, interrupting the uniformity of any intersubjective relation (the I relating to another I, i.e., to itself), renders communication conceivable. There is no chatter, no piping, without noise. Communication interferes in a common sense that it reproduces. More, the interference, which enjoys no function (as static enjoys no function in a broadcast), is communication's minimal condition. The reverse, to be sure, is also true. There exists no singing without piping as its conduit. Song, style, noise, interruption, however, never emerge as phenomena. They are not things; they happen. Hence, around Josephine, an event transpires: the gathering of the mouse folk *as folk*.

A man from Boston may not be able to hear correctly the woman from Texas due to her singular inflection. Yet without this, or some other accent, the man and woman do not talk at all. Either the common is split so that the gap can be traversed by a message, the discord turned to accord and vice-versa; or communication and community do not happen. Communication, in other words, is not a given. It is a work, an art. And it takes time, which is a waste of time relative to production and reproduction. Speakers craft their style according to the recipient or context, and also according to a perceived universal. The outcome, though, is never a product that reflects a subject or author, who must therefore *work out* each speech act if that act is to

function. For, part and parcel of the articulation is the reception, a force that orients and disorients in advance the speech act and speaker. *In advance*: a speaker's anticipation of the Other's understanding and/or misunderstanding figures the actual utterance. "Saying" does not reflect, hence reproduce, the subject, the receiver, or the context. It *comes out of* the field. And this is what Josephine's song embodies. It is not one speech act that might be differentiated from others within the collective sum of speech acts, but language's difference from itself, the artifice or attunement (Josephine's singing) that pertains to the common course (piping), that is, to nature, survival, and procreation, yet cannot be subsumed by it. Josephine is dubbed an inexperienced piper, and associated with the child, not because her imperfect practice communicates less effectively than piping but because piping is not her *language*. For piping, as the common sense, is the reduction of language to (near) zero. It is to singing as commanding/obeying is to conversation, signs are to din, peace is to disagreement, knowing is to learning, labor is to leisure, and reproduction is to play. Yet the oppositions are not neat since singing, in "Josephine," is not one of the parties within a split (between, say, play and production) but the splitting itself. Hence, Josephine's song surfaces as a party or part of community only through its forgetting. Kafka's tale in fact concludes by noting that Josephine will be memorialized among other national heroes. Yet, precisely because cast as hero, as a figure in the nationalist landscape, Josephine's intervention will be forgotten ("forgotten like all her brothers" [376]), not remembered. As the diva is subsumed into the pantheon of subjects, she lends herself to the reproduction of the relations of production which her song, in fact, disturbs.

For the event of the diva's song, unless so appropriated, does not serve the community or nation. It is functionless, taking place for no reason and no good: folks cannot say why Josephine's performances convoke assemblages. The gatherings (like all gatherings), to be sure, may lead to practical results, such as friendships, families, and revolutions. Yet that is not why they take place. They take place in the name of a little nothing, namely, Josephine's tune. The assembling and breaking up yields more assembling and breaking up, as when a game is undertaken, completed, then begun again. Relative to survival, which hinges on the reproduction of each individual mouse qua labor force, Josephine's performances are a waste. The diva introduces a lag into an overall efficiency. On the one hand, the gap menaces the well-being of the community; on the other, it serves as the condition of the collecting and collective, of the folk. Without the interruption

of the song, a particular folk is an indifferent throng, hence not particular, not a folk, not at all.

Numerous common subjects, coinciding in one time and place, do not by nature form a multiplicity, hence a community. Only division/union, language, can disclose the individual as a relation to others, thereby as proper to a collective. And as a relation, each such subject is relative, vulnerable, interpenetrated by others, consequently, more than one (a multiplicity), divided from and in itself, communal. By logical necessity, there are no whole, indivisible individuals in a community. Each mouse member of Kafka's tale is, therefore, open, prey to injury and death. The fact endangers the entire community: the debility or demise of a single mouse puts at risk the survival of the folk as a whole, since survival turns on incessant individual contributions. Even the delay of a single contributor is potentially the expiry of all. Hence, language, Josephine's song, the lag it inserts, is not only a waste within the life process that Kafka describes. It is waste that kills, though the survival process of the "throng" could not even commence without it. This explains why a debate concerning the status of Josephine's art exists: should her performances figure as a vocation? An act that is not deemed work for being the play of the useless and senseless chinwag of work (like the play of the steering wheel), Josephine's song nonetheless drives reproduction, since the reproduction is motored by the death it fends off.

The state and capitalism, and now global neoliberalism, seek consensus without discord and accord, that is, without interruption or rhythm or time. They seek immediate sense without mediation, discourse without noise. The only politics that can intervene into such a site, therefore, is Josephine's, that is, the politics of the functionless, of the game. Indeed, those who want art, music, culture, entertainment, and education to serve society, to operate in or for a cause or vision, including and especially aiding in the correction of injustice and inequity, ignore the condition of contemporary politics. There can be no politics (perhaps never, but certainly not today) without gatherings and separations that are without reason (this being, e.g., a proviso of revolt). Or stated differently, those who proclaim the secondary nature of language, art, and literature, relative to real matters such as work, consumption, survival, and identity, also proclaim the end of all that matters. For nothing matters, indeed, there is no matter, if we cannot hear, read, tell, hence promulgate the difference between tuning and piping, speaking and common sense, artifice and nature since, without these, there is nothing but the reproduction of reproduction, that is, nothing but an accomplished nihilism.

Let us not be confused: Josephine's song does not somehow disclose an alternative reason for living, namely, leisure, entertainment, or enjoyment. Leisure, like love and hatred, is not a reason for anything but, precisely, that which happens for no reason. And this "no reason" defines the human, at least since the Copernican Revolution. Man is the being that occupies no function in the natural order of things. Many have conjectured, of course, that the so-called rational animal, man, though his existence be without reason, is the being assigned to locate the reason of the totality.⁷ Yet only the most committed nihilist would argue that man *is* that reason; that the reason for plants, animals, the stars, the sky is man. Nor can this reason be located in man's capacity to aid in the survival of other men or of the species. If in fact the reason for man's existence is to preserve the life of men, he is merely one animal among others, and not, or no longer, man. Man is man and has always been man, because he communicates, that is, because he incorporates an artifice that he cannot mandate, yet without which he cannot be (man). Man is the artificial, playful animal. He sings and listens, paints and admires, loves and hates, courts friendship and rivalries, chit-chats over coffee, plays, partakes in rituals, in order to affirm, fine tune, and pass on the difference of the human. Or rather, the passing on, the communication of language, is the human. And if or when communication vanishes into common sense, if language comes to exist only in order to confirm beliefs that are already available, or if rivalry arises as so many competitions that, rather than exposing a party to death (as a rivalry must if it is indeed a rivalry), multiplies and reproduces a market that is sustained by this very competition, man faces his natural end, that is, his reduction to nature, to mere life. Yet "singing," language, art—and this is the point of the conclusion of "Josephine"—always erases itself. Man is by virtue of his coming obsolescence, a fact that Josephine's "singing," or rather, what one calls singing in the absence of a proper name, recalls.

"Josephine" is not, then, an allegory about human folks clinging to their humanness via the thread of a whispered song. The question is not whether Kafka's mice are actually men, since they sing or speak, or if men are actually mice, since they form an indifferent pack, but whether we can speak of the distinction. As he lies on his deathbed with laryngeal tuberculosis, unable to use his mouth, writing "Josephine," Kafka asks whether piping is all that is left, or whether we can still speak of speech, therefore of the speaking being, to wit, man.

Poet, Murderer, Judge, and Police

Bolaño's general interest in "Josephine" is not difficult to intuit. Bolaño belongs to a tradition of writers (George Bataille, for example) for whom art pertains to the nonproductive, nonexchangeable realm, a domain of excess now perhaps lost. Hence, Bolaño frequently turns to, and links inextricably, three activities: writing, sex, and killing. Carlos Weider is thereby an exemplary Bolaño character. Weider is introduced to the reader of *Distant Star* as a participant in early 1970s poetry workshops in Concepción. The other attendees, including the narrator, are university students and Leftist sympathizers. One learns immediately that Weider talks sparingly. When Weider actually comes to speak, he does so as if he were in a cloud (4). His Spanish does not recall that of any region or of a foreigner; and his poetry, while not inferior to that of his peers, sounds oddly as if it were penned by another person (though there is no indication that it is plagiarized). Weider does not seem able either to appropriate/naturalize language or, like Josephine, to compress it into a style, into a singular repetition. As a body that serves as the container of a talking machine, Weider in fact appears foreclosed from language. His extreme engagement with art should not then surprise. Nor should the fact that he evolves as a creator via an increasing interest in technology (he writes, then uses an airplane to cut verse into the sky, then takes photos, then makes use of a video camera). Weider's deployment of excrement for art is also predictable. Weider seeks to incorporate language, technology, art, and waste itself. The early poetry workshops thus prove insufficient for him. They end up merely disclosing to Weider his exteriority relative to language. The "artist" subsequently turns to crime and sex, ultimately creating an art exhibition, "the art of the future," out of the rapes, murders, and the cutting up of women. For Weider, violence does not serve a function, such as eliminating subversives. It represents, however perversely, a display of style, of the excess of the common sense that is style. Style and spectacle, here, cross; Weider's singular expositions fall seamlessly into publicity. This explains Bolaño's indirect reference, via Weider, to Zurita. Zurita, in the 1980s, also uses an airplane to write in the sky, with political motives that are the opposite of those of Weider. It is not at all certain, however, that Weider and Zurita should be deemed distinct. That is, we can no longer be sure that a difference obtains between silly eccentricity and Leftist intervention, show and happening, lunacy and art. The case is not that good and bad art, or making and killing, are

one. In the vacant landscape of the market, alienation, hence the will to identity and distinction, grows increasingly absurd and, indeed, alienating, aestheticist. The subsumption of unproductive time, that is, of language, leaves behind the desert of consensus, and invites the gratuitous as both the desperate recall of inexchangeable difference and as the mark of difference's end. Bolaño is not intimating that violence has assumed the role once played by writing. This is because, for him, writing has always been a form of violence, not a means to represent it. This, indeed, is Bolaño's point of departure, figuring in all his texts.

"The Insufferable Gaucho," in the collection of the same name, portrays Manuel Pereda, a widowed and retired judge with two children. Idle, Pereda comes to hang out with the son's writer-friends in a Buenos Aires café. He is bored by chatter about literature, viewing only two writers as worthy of discussion: Borges and his son. But he is enthralled by political banter. He anticipates the Argentine financial crisis of 2001, announcing—crazily, according to his listeners—just days before the events that Buenos Aires is sinking. Already somewhat unhinged, Pereda is thrown even further off-balance by the actual crisis. The social order breaks down; people of extremely different classes find themselves undertaking common endeavors. Pereda subsequently decides to abandon the metropolis, traveling to the dilapidated gaucho ranch where he apparently grew up.

Restaging—he himself is aware of the fact—Borges's "The South" (which Pereda mixes into his recall of "The Gospel According to Mark"), Pereda takes up occupancy in the ranch-shell, just as Juan Dahlman intends to do in Borges's tale. But whereas the gaucho existence that Dahlman experiences (likely in a dream) matches perfectly the one that he had imagined through literature, in "The Insufferable Gaucho" the pampa seems to Pereda totally out of whack. That is, while Pereda's conception of the gaucho, like Dahlman's, is preconceived by the protagonist's readings (in fact, many of the preconceptions *are* those of Dahlman), fiction and reality do not, for Pereda, share common features. In part, the point holds because the financial crisis, a product of neoliberalism, has distorted the periphery as much as it has the center. No cows and few horses can be found, only rabbits; ranching is hardly feasible; in the cantina, the gauchos who "ought" to be whiling away time with conversation, play Monopoly; the gauchos largely lack the pampa know-how that they are assumed to possess. The case, for Pereda, is not that he, the city-dweller, is out-of-step with the gauchos. The situation is that the gauchos are out-of-step with themselves.

Pereda informs other village inhabitants of the difference between a judge and a policeman. The police address order; judges defend justice. The division, not understood by the gauchos, is fundamental to Pereda. After all, he is not concerned with lawlessness or non-civility. His concern is equilibrium, adjustment. Bank accounts are unbalanced, the roles of rich and poor are jumbled up, the dichotomy between city and margin is no longer clear. Pereda himself tips toward madness. He sets out to restore symmetry, seeking to occupy the place of the Other, the (now lost) gaucho whose existence, set off from the metropolitan as barbarism is to civilization, balances the Argentine nation. In the pampa, Pereda even begins to lose his memory, as the gaucho—according to the literature, that is, according to Borges—tends to do. Yet the desire to “go-gaucho” is most manifest in Pereda’s wish, not so different from Dahlman’s, to stab someone or be stabbed. He expresses his yearning on various occasions. Yet he cannot realize it (precisely because the gauchos themselves do not seem to want to fight anymore) until he is recalled to Buenos Aires in order to attend to business. Here, Pereda is not, as is Dahlman, the sedentary librarian headed to the dangers of the South and of action. He is the gaucho coming home to the city. The Buenos Aires cabbie who drives him, seeing his gaucho attire, asks Pereda if he speaks Spanish. At the café he formerly frequented, Pereda stares fixedly at a writer in his fifties or sixties, roughly the same age as Pereda, dressed as a sort of hippy. The writer, disliking the gaze, shouts some challenging words at Pereda. Without physical provocation, Pereda knives him. The story concludes here, with no further details on the fate of the writer or of Pereda. Pereda decides to “return.” But is it a return to Buenos Aires, or back to the pampa? The reader cannot be sure.

Pereda, the judge, commits an aggressive act in order to reestablish the civilization/barbarism divide: proportion. Equilibrium has vanished not due to the unruliness of the periphery, nor because unruliness has subsumed the city (as Sarmiento discusses in *Facundo*), but because nothing exists outside an economy that levels all. The differences between gaucho and city denizen, pampa and metropolis, rich and poor within Buenos Aires, which yield the hegemonic if violent state, have vanished. Pereda thus strives to stand, himself, as the “too much,” the disproportion relative to both margin and center, to the state as a whole, that would make justice again necessary and possible. For balance, or justice, depends on imbalance, a third term that tips the scales. That is, it demands the *separation* between two sides, the scale, one that does not belong to either, and cannot be measured by either, but is the condition of both, ultimately falling to one side

or another. The condition of proportion is disproportion, which is measure, justice itself. Otherwise, all is pure neutrality, neither just nor unjust. Pereda lashes out at the writer, who in his garb doubles Pereda in his gaucho costume, because he hopes to reaffirm the role of language, of the literature that the gaucho represents in Borges, of the extra player in the social game. And he does so either because literature, anachronistic, no longer performs this function; or because the gaucho no longer conforms to the literary image (hero or outlaw). Unlike Dahlman's gestures (for whom the knife fight has a definite rationale), Pereda's antics are thereby purposeless. Bolaño's protagonist emerges as neither laudable nor futile but, precisely, as insufferable. Disturbance, today, is no less annoying than the status quo it annoys.

Pepe, the Cop (Pepe el Tira), protagonist of "Police Rat," patrols the sewers where the rats reside, seek their food, sleep, and reproduce. The dwelling, in fact, recalls Santa Teresa of 2666. As is the case with Santa Teresa, the most defining characteristics of the site are its garbage, murders, desolation, hunger, and danger. Though a rat, Pepe is Josephine's nephew. The diva has been dead for numerous generations. Nostalgically recalled, no two rats agree about the nature of Josephine's singing. The rats live under constant menace, not only of toxins, but of snakes and other predators who eat them. To fend off the poisons, mice and rats have mated, developing through reproduction a more resilient species.

Pepe seems a decent cop, protecting children, maintaining order in a friendly manner. He is welcomed in the houses of good citizens. One would not associate him with the corrupt or lazy policemen of 2666, nor with the police force of a dictatorship. Hence, it comes as a bit of a surprise when Pepe argues that "tira," the slang used for cop in the tale, comes from "tirano"; and that a tyrant is a figure who enjoys absolute impunity, a rather loaded word within a text by an author who writes so much about Latin American dictatorship and postdictatorship.

The tale revolves around the murders of an adult rat, whose throat is cut, and of an infant, who is starved to death. Assassinations of rats are common in "Police Rat." Killed by predators, the victims are typically eaten. For acts in the sewers are performed in the interest of subsistence and survival; although sometimes brutal, they are relatively just means of maintaining the natural order. The two murders in question, then, are odd because the dead bodies are left unconsumed. Pepe offers a conjecture that other rats deem outrageous: the perpetrator is a rat (others presume rats do not kill, because they do not eat

their own kind). Another assassination then occurs. Again the victim, a reciter of poems, is left uneaten, and Pepe grows more convinced of his theory. The unthinkable is happening: rats are killing rats. Pepe seeks to restore justice. He tracks down the criminal, an adolescent tough named Héctor. The ruffian is an admirer (though he is born long after she lived) of Josephine. After a discussion and struggle, Pepe kills Héctor. Taken before the magistrate, he is not charged with a crime. He is instead told never to breathe the word about Héctor's existence. Order seems reestablished. Pepe reassumes his previous duties, rescuing rats in peril.

Perhaps the key to the tale appears when Pepe, in front of the aged judge, is asked if Josephine the Singer was indeed his aunt. The judge notes that she (the judge) is old enough to remember Josephine. She then adds: "An Anomaly" (70). Pepe, a bit confused, realizes that the judge is talking about the killer, not Josephine. Yet the association between Josephine and Héctor has been drawn; both are anomalies. Earlier in the tale, Pepe has noted that, among the rats, artists are almost unheard of. When such figures do emerge, they are not mocked or despised—they are somewhat admired, in fact—but face extreme loneliness, since almost all rats dedicate themselves exclusively to the communal survival described earlier.

An elderly rodent intimates that Josephine's talent lay in her capacity to make the audience feel the emptiness of desire, that is, of feelings irreducible to production and reproduction. Héctor, in fact, is possessed by similar cravings, above all, by the desire to know. He isolates (so that the baby cannot be eaten) and then starves an infant, hoping to witness the entire life process. One of his victims is among the few bards; with this act, Héctor seeks insight into the superfluous activity of poetry. Pepe himself contends that Héctor kills for pleasure. Thus Héctor's acts, like play and song in Kafka's "Josephine," executed for the sake of knowledge, pleasure, or curiosity, threaten the community's very existence. They represent activity that is not only destructive, and not only a waste, but that, since it meets no need, possesses no limits. The killing of rat by rat, unlike hunger, is an insatiable act. And it is a *human* act. Only humans, Bolaño intimates in the story, kill their own *not* out of necessity. For man, insofar as he is man, is the being for whom non-necessity, the waste that is speech, the improper, is proper (since, without the waste, man ceases to be man).

When Pepe and Héctor confront each other, Héctor admits to his fear, and also states that Josephine, too, was afraid. He indicates, however, that by stopping him, Pepe will not prevent the many others

who will commit crimes similar to his. And the ensuing sham trials will not frighten off these others. When Pepe contends that Héctor is incurable, Héctor asks who will cure Pepe. The allusions to state terror—a regime of fear and corruption, as well as one that conflates dissidence and disease, education and therapy—are unmistakable. To be sure, and to reiterate, Pepe does not appear to be a villain in the tale. He expresses no wish to kill or destroy, only to preserve. Yet what the protagonist strives to conserve is a universe composed entirely of needs, survival, and the reproduction of their conditions. Excess, yearning to know for no reason, and desire are fatal to such endeavors. In Pepe's universe, in fact, fatality itself has been subsumed into reproduction. For while the death of the mouse genus (it has merged into a more efficient species) is on the horizon within the tale, the death merely drives the formation of a new, superior type of rodent whose way of life (perpetual survival mode) does not differ from that of the original, that of Josephine's mouse folk.

Héctor's actions express a desire for the fragile surplus that both nature and society, now joined, strive to annihilate. Josephine's song expresses the same surplus, which is why (in Héctor's view) Josephine was afraid. She, too, was always at the brink of disappearance. Murder, in other words, is a manifestation of a dying excess, an extra that perishes not when the violence stops, but when it falls into the reproductive process. And that is why the Héctor murders must be *quieted*. According to Pepe, and the judge at his trial, they must never be spoken about. The public manifestation of the idea, represented by Héctor, of living without survival as goal must be hidden and/or terminated. For such a notion invites curiosity, which invites desire, which invites excess, and then the demise of excess, that is, its murder. Pepe, the "tira" or tyrant, especially given the immunity that he receives, embodies the sovereign. Yet this is not the state sovereign, the sovereign of dictatorship. The sovereign of the "neutral" market, as long as it saves, represents, and polices environmental balance, mere nonartificial life, cannot be judged, condemned, or touched for, since it is without wrong, it is also without justice and/or adjustment.

Bolaño places as his epigraph to *The Insufferable Gaucho* lines from the conclusion of "Josephine": "So perhaps we shall not lose too much after all" (translation modified). With the withdrawal of Josephine from the scene, Kafka's narrator says, the mouse folk have not lost "too much." Josephine's song will be retrieved through its conversion from language/art into national anthem, from historical event into myth, from singular intervention into conventional "song." The "too much" is saved; yet, "after all," and ironically, the saving of the

excess (one that is also less than nothing, itself a loss) represents its departure, just as the recall of Josephine's act as *song* names the disappearance of the same act. The turning of Josephine into a subject, or her conversion into the policeman of "Police Rat," into her surviving blood relative, signals the appropriation of the event of language for national consensus. In "Police Rat," the event, which is the death of species, morphs into another representation of the same species (the rat-mouse new species), so no one even notices the difference. No one can read the distinction between the being (man) that passes, and the being that displaces it, since the difference is reading itself, or language, whose last vestige is still literature, which is what slips away in the process. Héctor inherits the trace, which is the trace of Josephine. Pepe, the nephew, is also an inheritor, though he labors to erase the trace. Thus Héctor, a rat who kills rats, and Pepe, a rat who kills rats (kills Héctor, yet receives the immunity of the sovereign), are doubles. Their respective acts are progenies of the murder of art, one work undoing that of the other. "Police Rat," like other Bolaño narratives, thereby posits literature as a suicide in search of its killer.

Notes

1. See "Vagaries of the Literature of Doom."
2. "así se hacía la literatura en Chile" (146).
3. "Así se hace la literatura. O lo que nosotros, para no caer en el vertedero, llamamos literatura" (147).
4. The notion of the "they" and of "they-speak" is theorized throughout Heidegger's *Being and Time*, for example, sections 27, pp. 163–68, and 35, pp. 211–14.
5. "Vivimos en colectividad y la colectividad sólo necesita el trabajo diario, la ocupación constante de cada uno de sus miembros en un fin que escapa a los afanes individuales y que, sin embargo, es lo único que garantiza nuestro existir en tanto individuos" (57).
6. "Language" is theorized most explicitly in section 34, pp. 203–10, of *Being and Time*.
7. This analysis of "man's reason" follows Blumemberg's thesis on the Copernican Revolution.

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Part IV
Prose Poetry and Poetry in Prose





Chapter 8

Performing Disappearance: Heaven and Sky in Roberto Bolaño and Raúl Zurita

Luis Bagué Quílez

Asombrosas cosechas llovieron del cielo

—Raúl Zurita

Writing in the Sky: “La vida nueva” by Raúl Zurita

On June 2, 1982, Raúl Zurita’s verses fly over New York. The discursive lines of “La vida nueva” (The new life) intersect the skyline of a smoggy city, hidden under a dense crowd of bodies and buildings. New York is then an optical lab where the laws of perspective meet things “which from afar seem gigantic and preposterous,”¹ according to the impression that García Lorca wrote in a letter to Melchor Fernández Almagro. The metropolis has not yet announced the millenarian picture that two columns of black smoke will draw on September 11, 2001, with disturbing symmetry. On June 2, 1982, the smoke produced by five aircrafts projects 15 verses at a height of 4,500 feet. Zurita’s feat is summarized in that algorithm. His poem transforms the skyline of New York into a museum without boundaries, and turns its citizens into tourists in their own city: they are invited to visit the sidereal tableaux of a particular art gallery. However, this calligraphic exercise transcends its material representation. The author relates the fleeting gesture of writing in the air to the desire for eternity and permanence. The lyrical choreography culminates with the photographs of the literary process made by the artist Juan Downey, and the inclusion of “La vida nueva” in the book *Anteparaiso* (*Anteparadise*, 1982).

This action displays a primary symbolism associated with writing scenery and a secondary one linked to the message it conveys. There



is a striking contrast between the place intended for the poem and the technique used for its execution. The color connotations related to blue sky and white smoke seem obvious. The abode of the gods and the enclave of spirituality are located in heaven/sky.² In turn, the smoke symbolizes the purification of passions and the equidistance between cosmic and human nature. Faced with the harmony of the sky, the airplane exemplifies the synergy between the eye and the machine advocated by Futurism. However, Zurita disagrees with the bellicosity underlying this movement (Virilio 63). Moreover, the aircraft is guided by the autopilot of the imagination in opposition to the diurnal regime governing the sky, as pointed out by Chevalier and Gheerbrant (159–60).

The content of “La vida nueva” is enriched by the usual persuasive strategies in advertising rhetoric. This influence may be seen in a passage from the novel *El día más blanco* (*The Whitest Day*, 1999), where Zurita evokes fragmentary sequences from his childhood. Among them, the memory of an advertisement spotted in the sky of Santiago de Chile:

I see the wind pushing the clouds, opening a little way from where the sky begins to expand and fill the entire horizon of a not exactly remembered childhood day. An airplane is drawing two soap names (“Perlina” and “Radiolina”) in the sky with white smoke. The maneuvers of the small plane are silhouetted over the shining morning, and the two words are drawn in the blue sky for a moment.³

Vision is a key category in Zurita’s creative universe, in which the recurrence of certain obsessive images alternates with the exuberance of an iterative rhythm (Edwards, “Reflexiones sobre Anteparaiso” 24–25). In addition, the visibility of the literary action is an answer to the “aesthetics of disappearance” practiced by Latin America’s Southern Cone dictatorships. This premise is reflected in the writer’s biography. On March 18, 1980, Zurita tried to blind himself by throwing pure ammonia over his eyes. This self-destructive impulse was not inspired by the performances about the limits of the body that Marina Abramović has called “body drama.” It was, rather, the result of impotence against the imperative to contemplate what was not possible to keep watching. Oedipus’s physical violence becomes here a conceptual violence: a requiem for the purity of an eye that has lost the aura that Walter Benjamin attributed to art before its mechanical reproduction. That old episode is recreated in “Poema

encontrado entre tus ruinas: *Anteparaiso*” (Zurita), where the blue sky involves a psychic fracture and a collective scream:

Acid-blocking my view of the
blue sky of this new land yes sure:
to the glory of Him who moves all
that way, throwing myself blinded by all
that liquid against my own eyes those
vitrined images, that’s how I wanted to start Paradise.⁴

Visual poetry and land art converge in “La vida nueva” the opening poem in *Anteparaiso*. The photographs of each sentence of the poem are included in the various sections of the book, providing a pattern of reading and some textual clues. Zurita writes here about a lost country (Chile) and a regained exile (United States). This dialectical tension is condensed in the first 15 verses of the volume, which work as a symbolic space, germinal metaphor, and structural pattern:

MY GOD IS HUNGER
MY GOD IS SNOW
MY GOD IS NO
MY GOD IS disappointment
MY GOD IS CARRION
MY GOD IS PARADISE
MY GOD IS PAMPA
MY GOD IS CHICANO
MY GOD IS CANCER
MY GOD IS EMPTINESS
MY GOD IS WOUND
MY GOD IS GHETTO
MY GOD IS PAIN
MY GOD IS
MY LOVE OF GOD. (Trans. Jack Schmitt)⁵

The text is organized around the duality heaven/sky and earth. However, this dichotomy does not imply a Manichean option between an affirmative (heaven/sky) and a negative (ground) perspective. The perception of the poetic subject does not fall within the limits between cosmic weightlessness and terrestrial gravitation. The poem is addressed to the Latin American community in New York, although its solidarity invokes all the people without earth and all the souls without heaven. Symptoms of misery and death are

combined with images of life and regeneration. Disappointment, illness, or isolation are determined by an ambivalent and seemingly contradictory symbolism. Thus, the adverb *no* does not only imply a lack of something, but also the expression of the insubordination against the establishment. The word “carrion” does not only mean “putrefaction” but also refers to the organic regeneration arising from decomposition. Furthermore, the concept of *paradise* reminds us of the human Fall and the Edenic nostalgia. Something similar happens with the terms “snow” (ice crystallization and sublimation of earth), “Pampa” (human loneliness and vastness of the plains), or “Chicano” (social marginalization and identity claim). Even the noun “emptiness” represents both the nonplace and the new place produced “by the loss of the substance needed to form the sky.”⁶

Zurita promotes the deliberate ambiguity of his poem when he faces the resemantization of the Dantesque phrase *vita nuova*. The title “La vida nueva” invites us to move from divine comedy to human tragedy, from promise to action, from old to new world. In the preliminary note to the English translation of *Anteparadiso*, Zurita mentions the democratization of the heights to which the aforementioned verses were referred:

This poem is the conclusion of the *Anteparadise*. When I first designed this project, I thought the sky was precisely the place toward which the eyes of all communities have been directed, because they have hoped to find in it the signs of their destinies; therefore, the greatest ambition one could aspire to would be to have that same sky as a page where anyone could write. (Trans. Jack Schmitt)⁷

“La nueva vida” is ultimately an exorcism that attempts to spread the ashes of the recent past and provide corporeality to those who embody the memory of an absence. Indeed, the disappeared during the Chilean dictatorship and Latino immigrants in the United States form an invisible community that can only gain visibility through a subversive act as unexpected as skywriting. Thus, it may be said that “the Chilean community has recovered its voice.”⁸ The lines that crossed the airspace of New York, on June 2, 1982, were an urgent telegram and an anonymous gallery, a mental landscape and a pointless calligram, the dream of a possible cosmopolis and a monument to the urban twentieth-century dystopias:

Okay, I wanted to do so;
purer and cleaner, so that when

scriptures were drawn in the sky
 I may imagine them infinitely most
 beautiful in its inverted layout within
 my soul. (My translation)⁹

In *Zurita's* (2012) torrential epiphany, where the proper name negotiates the clauses of the autobiographic pact, the reference to “La nueva vida” acquires a new meaning. Painful memories of the military dictatorship lead to a hopeless (re)version of that poem. God’s insensitivity to torture and crime moves the ambiguity of the original text to an ontological skepticism. Zurita imagines now “fleeing aircrafts writing in the sky”¹⁰ a number of variations from his most recognizable slogan:

MY GOD DOES NOT COME
 MY GOD DOES NOT ARRIVE
 MY GOD DOES NOT RETURN
 MY GOD WAS NOT THERE
 MY GOD REFUSED
 MY GOD DID NOT SAY
 MY GOD DOES NOT CRY
 MY GOD DOES NOT BLEED
 MY GOD DOES NOT FEEL
 MY GOD DOES NOT LOVE
 MY GOD DOES NOT RISE
 MY GOD DOES NOT SEE
 MY GOD DOES NOT LOOK
 MY GOD DOES NOT HEAR
 MY GOD IS NOT. (My translation)¹¹

However, this composition is not a mere recantation of the previous art project, but rather its unconscious rewriting. Not surprisingly, Zurita has argued on several occasions that poets’ mission is to transcribe “dreams, nightmares or images that are in the depths of the communities to which they belong.”¹² The word “no” preceding each verb must also be interpreted in the light of its political implications. On the one hand, “no” is the collective decision assumed after the referendum on the continuity of General Augusto Pinochet in 1988, as told by Jorge Edwards: “On the eve of the Referendum, when a resounding *no* triumphed over Pinochetism, the extent of the information that reached even the most marginalized populations, unions, and parishes of Santiago and the surrounding provinces was, frankly, remarkable” (Edwards, “Democratic Culture”, 8). On the

other hand, the actions of the group CADA (Colectivo de Acciones de Arte) of which Zurita formed part, influenced in the same direction, adopting the term “no” as a public currency and a democratic mantra.¹³ The inclusion of the inverted image of “La vida nueva” in *Zurita* after the celestial performance gives it a nature of post scriptum and assures it as palimpsestous writing.

In Zurita’s view, poetry is a way of redemption related to Aristotelian catharsis: a mingled emotion made of ethic compassion and aesthetic shock. From this perspective, the “game of writing poetry” is not too different from the children’s game of figuring out human silhouettes in the arbitrary forms of clouds. Literature illuminates the shadows of the past and corrects the thinned footprint of death projected on the daylight screen:

Writing is a private practice of resurrection. But it is also an image, and although it might sound crazy, is a concrete image: to see the faces of those you have loved drawn in heaven/sky. Not on the vaults of the great modern cathedrals: banks or new stations, but in heaven/sky. Huge portraits drawn by airplanes with white smoke, which stand out against the blue sky and then vanish.¹⁴

Deconstructing Heaven: *La literatura nazi en América* and *Estrella distante* by Roberto Bolaño

In late 1973 and early 1974, the infamous Carlos Ramírez Hoffman anticipates Zurita’s Promethean quest to write his poems over the sky of Chile, as is described in the entry devoted to this character in Bolaño’s *La literatura nazi en América* (*Nazi Literature in the Americas*, 1996). The book is an apocryphal encyclopedia that compiles some fascist authors’ biographies. According to the narrator (a certain Bolaño), Ramírez Hoffman’s happenings begin in Concepción. This versatile artist—writer, photographer, and torturer—reproduces over the sky several verses of Genesis (2.1 and 2.23) and exposes his particular poetics of destruction. During that period, Ramírez Hoffman used to print “gray black smoke letters on the rose tinged blue sky.”¹⁵ The exhibits are repeated at the end of 1973, when he performs a writing show at the military airport of El Cóndor, and at the beginning of 1974, when he flies from Punta Arenas to the base of Arturo Prat at the South Pole: “In Antarctica everything was okay. Ramírez Hoffman wrote ANTARCTICA IS CHILE, and was filmed and photographed, and then returned to Concepcion, alone in his small plane.”¹⁶ The exploits of the infamous Ramírez Hoffman may be

interpreted as spontaneous actions and are linked to the Duchampian ready-made and to the Futurist *aeropoesia*. The transience of these visual poems may also be connected with Bolaño's narrative artifacts and paraliterary exercises of visceral realism (Speranza 152). At this point, there is a clear parallel between Ramírez Hoffman's proofs and Raúl Zurita's works. Like the former, Zurita usually includes some intertexts from the Bible in his poems, as illustrated by the composition "Los hoyos del cielo II," which is preceded by two fragments of Genesis (2.1 and 18.15). Moreover, the obsession to capture a graphic testimony of their works is shared by both the fictional character and the actual antagonist. For instance, the Antarctic verse by Ramírez Hoffman serves as a sounding board of "Pastoral de Chile": "ascend feelings and landscapes together / glaciers of Antarctica and glaciers of the mind / Chilean stones and hearts made of stone."¹⁷

The main literary action by Ramírez Hoffman takes place at Santiago de Chile's Captain Lindstrom aerodrome. This is the central episode of the story, which recreates the process of writing "La nueva vida." While flying over different representative locations of the Chilean capital and the country's recent history (suburbs, downtown streets, La Moneda palace), Ramírez Hoffman spreads the black shreds of his verses. During the exhibit, a thunderstorm is triggered. The incident makes authorities abandon the aerodrome quickly, and threatens the pilot's acrobatics. However, Ramírez Hoffman continues scribbling words in the heart of the storm. At the end, an apocalyptic message illuminates the firmament of Santiago de Chile: "Death is friendship / Death is Chile / Death is responsibility / Death is love / Death is growth / Death is communion / Death is cleansing / Death is my heart / Take my heart / Our change, our advantage / Death is resurrection" (my translation).¹⁸

In *Estrella distante* (*Distant Star*, 1996), Bolaño gives textual autonomy to Ramírez Hoffman's construct. This novel is conceived as a Menardian extension and as a rewriting of the last chapter of *La literatura nazi en América*. In fact, the narrative is structured through a two-voice choir composed of the fictional *Doppelgänger* Arturo B and the authorial *alter ego*, Bolaño. While the former offers his version of the story—*versus* the official history—the latter adopts the role of a witness and a transcriber:

So we took that final chapter and shut ourselves up for a month and a half in my house in Blanes, where, guided by his dreams and nightmares, we composed the present novel. My role was limited to preparing refreshments, consulting a few books, and discussing the reuse

of numerous paragraphs with Arturo and the increasingly animated ghost of Pierre Menard. (Trans. Chris Andrews)¹⁹

In this novel, Carlos Wieder inherits Ramírez Hoffman's skills while improving his biographical itinerary. The journey begins at Concepción, in a "lost sunset of 1973."²⁰ Like his predecessor, Wieder writes some phrases extracted from Genesis (1.1, 5) in the sky: "But then, suddenly, the letters appeared, as if the sky itself had secreted them. Perfectly formed letters of grey-black smoke on the sky's enormous screen of rose-tinged blue, chilling the eyes of those who saw them. IN PRINCIPIO... CREAVIT DEUS... CALEUM ET TERRAM, I read as if in a dream."²¹ Nevertheless, now Bolaño inserts some interpolations that demystify the feat and highlight the hallucinogenic nature of that experience: "I supposed—or hoped—it was part of an advertizing campaign."²² This first essay culminates with a brief recommendation: "Learn."²³ The following actions by Wieder correct Ramírez Hoffman's proofs at the airport of El Cóndor and in Antarctica. Two new exhibits are also mentioned:

One in Santiago, where he wrote verses from the Bible and quotes from *The Rebirth of Chile*, the other in Los Ángeles (in the province of Bío Bío), where he flew with two other pilots who unlike him were civilians... In collaboration, the three of them drew a large (and rather wobbly) Chilean flag in the sky.²⁴

Following the model of the chapter devoted to Ramírez Hoffman in *La literatura nazi*, Wieder's literal and symbolic ascent corresponds to his recital at the aerodrome Captain Lindstrom. His acrobatics over the sky of Santiago de Chile imitate the actions and the text of his predecessor, with just a mere alteration in the penultimate verse. In the place where Ramírez Hoffman had written "Our change, our advantage,"²⁵ Wieder adds his signature as a sign of authorship. At the end, Bolaño seems reluctant to accept the authenticity of the facts:

Perhaps the Capitan Lindstrom airstrip was never set up for a display of aerial poetry. Perhaps Wieder wrote his poem over the sky of Santiago without asking permission or warning anyone, although it seems unlikely. Perhaps it didn't even rain that day in Santiago, although there are witnesses who, at the time, were sitting idle on park benches looking up at the sky or staring out of the windows of lonely rooms, and who still remember the words in the sky and then the purifying rain. But perhaps it happened otherwise. In 1974 hallucinations were not uncommon. (Trans. Chris Andrews)²⁶

The end of this chapter describes the macabre photo exhibit organized by Wieder after his stunts. In this installation of “new art,” attended by the Chilean army staff, images of tortured bodies are shown. Visitors realize that the protagonists of the photos are real women disappeared during the coup, and are represented as mere found objects in a sort of cruel Artaudian epiphany: “The women looked like mannequins, in some cases like broken dismembered mannequins . . . The photos, in general, are of low quality, but the impression they cause to those who contemplate them is really vivid.”²⁷ The scary museum of the dictatorship challenges the limits of contemplation.

The aforementioned passages from *La literatura nazi* and *Estrella distante* raise a controversial question about their relationship to Zurita’s work. Is it a tribute, a parody, a referential allusion? It seems plausible to interpret the palimpsest by Ramírez Hoffman/Wieder as a mirror image or a specular splitting of Zurita’s poetry (Manzoni 39–50; Gamboa Cárdenas 211–36). The negative analogy between “La vida nueva” and the *aeropoeem* by Ramírez Hoffman/Wieder invites us to examine the premises of both texts: (1) an aesthetic project serving divergent interests, as reflected in the landscape in which the literary action is set (sunny sky/cloudy sky), and in the rhetorical tools used to carry it out (white smoke/black smoke); (2) an ideological project based on the confrontation between the claim of utopia (revolutionary aspiration) and the prophylaxis of spirit (fascist aspiration); (3) an ethical-political project that affects the metaphoric values related to the sky of New York (crystallization of freedom) and the sky of Santiago de Chile (exaltation of repressive force). The performative dimension of the proposal, which has a collective scope in Zurita and a narcissistic nature in Ramírez Hoffman/Wieder, should be also mentioned.²⁸ This last opposition also affects the addressees and the execution of the works, as Bolaño admits: “Obviously, Zurita has never flown a plane. I know what he did in the sky of New York, but he paid to do so. The main difference is that Wieder is a pilot, and he is a very good pilot.”²⁹ In short, Bolaño’s aim does not only require us to reconstruct a hypothetical past, but also involves the creation of a new reality. In fact, a poetic act that seeks to recompose the image of a divided community retrospectively becomes an exaltation of fascist horror. While Zurita’s discursive violence is justified by his desire to advocate a utopia, the wavering lines by Hoffman/Wieder have a different purpose: to connect literature with death, and to work for its aestheticization and its glorification (Jennerjahn 80).

This reading is based on the idea that Zurita’s poetry represents an opposite worldview to that assumed by Bolaño’s characters. However,

this parallelism entails a suspiciously perfect closure. After all, the initial queries remain floating in the air. Is it possible to understand the reference to “La vida nueva” in *La literatura nazi* and in *Estrella distante* as a mere secondary plot? Can we assume the presumption of innocence in a writer as little innocent as Bolaño? We should rule out both an intertextual mechanism and a literary joke, since the first option is too simplistic and the second too sinister, even for a natural-born provocateur such as Bolaño.

In spite of the contrary directions of their works, both Ramírez Hoffman/Wieder and Zurita share something that may be the key of this intertextual challenge: the ambition to produce a total work that turns the author into a small demiurge (*deus occasionatus*). This premise is consistent with an aesthetic legacy based on “the tradition of rupture,”³⁰ in Octavio Paz’s terms. Although the content and scope of their creations are radically different, a similar authorial vocation is seen in both Zurita’s and Bolaño’s characters. Ramírez Hoffman/Wieder respond to the stimulus of a self-destructive art, whose paradigm is the Chilean dictatorship. In contrast, Zurita represents a resistant postavant-garde organized around the CADA. By choosing Zurita to define the literary maneuvers of his characters, Bolaño does not mean to mock the poet’s either artistic or ideological project, but rather the type of author he represents. They aspire to the same goal, but Bolaño opts for a pop formula to express his commitment. As María Luisa Fischer states, the redefinition of Zurita’s performances naturally fit into “literary traditions within the novel—they are, after all, a matter of life and death for the characters and the narrator.”³¹ Zurita is the epitome of a Saturnian writer, whose resounding psalmody devours the originality of his followers. Bolaño had warned about this danger in his article “La poesía chilena y la intemperie” (Homeless Chilean Poetry, 1999), in which the praise for Zurita’s work becomes a pretext for an elegy to a Chilean poetic generation:

Zurita creates a magnificent work, which stands out among his generation and breaks the rules of the previous generation. However his eschatology and his messianism are also the cornerstones of a mausoleum or of a funeral pyre toward almost all Chilean poets headed during the eighties. That *dolce stil nuovo* pretended to be refreshing and epic and in some way it was, but its consequences were bitter and pathetic.³²

Bolaño had also rejected Zurita’s celestial symphony in an interview for the magazine *Qué pasa* (July 20, 1998), where he argued

against Zurita, through his poetic diction, ran the risk of becoming a medium or a secular saint:

I find Zurita absolutely messianic in his references to God and to the resurrection of Chile. In his poetry he seeks the salvation of Chile, which is supposed to come through mystical or not rational keys. Zurita refuses Enlightenment and attempts to reach the essence of mankind. Poetically, it is very tempting, but I really do not believe in that eschatology.³³

The epilogue of this discussion is dated 2011. In “Mi Dios no estuvo Mi Dios no quiso Mi Dios no dijo” (*Zurita*), Zurita picks up the gauntlet thrown by Bolaño. The author regains the leitmotif of sky-writing to pay homage to Bolaño and to build a memorial to those who disappeared during the dictatorship. The iconographic analogy between the dark blast of the aircrafts and the bodies thrown into the ocean is especially evident in those verses that recreate the topic of “los vuelos de la muerte” (death flights) with an extraordinary strength:

When emerging from the storm were seen again
the stadiums of the occupied country and over them the hepatic
Bolaño writing with aircrafts the distant star of
a god who was not a god who declined a
god who did not say while the morning grew up and
it was like another ocean inside the ocean the nude
bodies falling the love of the broken mouth the stands
plenty of prisoners waving his arms to the waves.³⁴

Conclusion: Between Heaven and Sky

Irony, intertextuality, and metafiction offer a new approach to tradition, halfway between complicity and parody. Through different aesthetic premises, Zurita’s visionary poems and Bolaño’s fictional mystifications pose the same questions: how can horror be named? Is art legitimized to reveal what we do not want to see? In the early twenty-first century, the answers must be placed at the crossroads between different representational codes. If the concept of violence progresses according to social changes, the way we reflect it must also change: neither the Brechtian distance nor the Artaudian theater of cruelty are useful to represent this unstable reality. The hypervisibility of the media has paradoxically resulted in a collective lack of vision. In a stark contrast, the aforementioned texts propose a different credo:

these authors demand the necessary words and images to represent those who have lost their voices and bodies. More generally, this approach examines the way in which two main authors of Chilean contemporary literature have performed disappearance in their works. At the end of *Zurita* (661), the oracular poet discovers the synthesis of his own literary project in a quote from the New Testament: “Your names are sculpted in heaven / sky.”³⁵ This is the challenge for those who have decided to write in the sky and from heaven.

Notes

1. “que de lejos parecen gigantescas y descabelladas” (652).
2. In Spanish, the word *cielo* means both “sky” and “heaven.”
3. “Veo el viento empujando las nubes, abriendo un pequeño trecho desde donde el cielo comienza a ensancharse hasta ocupar todo el horizonte de un día de infancia muy antiguo, no precisado. Sobre él un avión va trazando con humo blanco el nombre de dos jabones de ropa: ‘Perlina’ y ‘Radiolina.’ Las volteretas del pequeño avión se recortan contra el esplendor de la mañana y por un momento las dos palabras se dibujan en el azul del cielo” (*El día más blanco* 79).
4. Cerrándome con el ácido a la vista del
cielo azul de esta nueva tierra sí claro:
a la gloria de aquel que todo mueve
así, tirándome cegado por todo el
líquido contra mis propios ojos esas
vitrinadas; así quise comenzar el Paraíso. (*Zurita* 440)

The poem is accompanied by the following footnote: “Y quemados, tus párpados se iban abriendo contra las ruinas de un cielo demolido, entero escrito, derrumbado en el corredor de las aguas” (And your burnt eyelids were opening against the ruins of a demolished completely written sky, collapsed in the hallway of the water).

5. MI DIOS ES HAMBRE
MI DIOS ES NIEVE
MI DIOS ES NO
MI DIOS ES DESENGAÑO
MI DIOS ES CARROÑA
MI DIOS ES PARAÍSO
MI DIOS ES PAMPA
MI DIOS ES CHICANO
MI DIOS ES CÁNCER
MI DIOS ES VACÍO
MI DIOS ES HERIDA
MI DIOS ES GHETTO
MI DIOS ES DOLOR
MI DIOS ES

MI AMOR DE DIOS. (*Anteparáiso* 31; capitalized in the original version)

6. “por la pérdida de la sustancia necesaria para formar el cielo” (Cirlot 455).
7. “Este poema es la conclusión de *Anteparáiso*. Cuando tuve esta idea pensé que el cielo era precisamente el lugar hacia el cual todas las comunidades, desde los tiempos más remotos, han dirigido sus miradas porque han creído que allí están las señas de su destino, entonces, la más gran [*sic*] ambición a la que se podría aspirar es tener ese mismo cielo como una gran página donde cualquiera pudiese escribir” (*Anteparáiso* 24).
8. “la comunidad chilena ha recuperado su voz” (Cánovas 87). Trans. Annabelle Clippinger.
9. *Está bien, quise hacerlo así;
más puro y más limpio, para que cuando
se dibujaran las escrituras en el cielo
poder imaginármelas infinitamente más
bellas en su trazado invertido dentro
de mi alma.* (*Anteparáiso* 203; italics in the original version)
10. “aviones en fuga escribiendo en el cielo.” (*Zurita* 681)
11. MI DIOS NO LLEGA
MI DIOS NO VIENE
MI DIOS NO VUELVE
MI DIOS NO ESTUVO
MI DIOS NO QUISO
MI DIOS NO DIJO
MI DIOS NO LLORA
MI DIOS NO SANGRA
MI DIOS NO SIENTE
MI DIOS NO AMA
MI DIOS NO AMANECE
MI DIOS NO VE
MI DIOS NO MIRA
MI DIOS NO OYE
MI DIOS NO ES. (*Zurita* 677–81; capitalized in the original version)
These verses are part of the section entitled “Mi Dios es no.”
12. “sueños, pesadillas o imágenes que están en lo más profundo de las comunidades a las cuales pertenecen” (Epple 878).
13. Juliet Lynd (30) summarizes the founding principles of the CADA in the following terms: “This eclectic group of writers (Raúl Zurita and Diamela Eltit), visual artists (Lotty Rosenfeld and Juan Castillo), and a sociologist (Fernando Balcells) . . . created a number of happenings in the late seventies and early eighties, including . . . the painting of the expression ‘No +’ throughout the city. The latter was spontaneously

integrated into popular re-democratization movements, as people added their own endings to the slogan ('no + tortura,' 'no + hambre,' etc.)."

14. "Escribir es un ejercicio privado de resurrección. Pero es también una imagen y, aunque parezca algo demencial, es una imagen concreta: ver los rostros de quienes has amado dibujándose en el cielo. No sobre las bóvedas de las grandes catedrales modernas: los bancos o las nuevas estaciones de metro, sino en el cielo. Inmensos retratos trazados por aviones con líneas de humo blanco que se recortan sobre el azul del cielo para luego deshacerse" ("Las cenizas del poema" 9).
15. "letras de humo gris negro sobre el cielo azul rosado" (*La literatura nazi* 197–98).
16. "En la Antártida todo fue bien. Ramírez Hoffman escribió LA ANTÁRTIDA ES CHILE, y fue filmado y fotografiado y después volvió a Concepción, solo, en su pequeño avión" (201).
17. "asciendan juntos sentimientos y paisajes / glaciares de la Antártica y glaciares de la mente / piedras de Chile y corazones de piedra" (*Anteparaiso* 153). This landscape will reappear in the epilogue of *INRI* (2003), where the ridges, valleys, and deserts of Chile cry a lament for the dreams suspended between the sky and the soil of an imaginary homeland:
 Cientos de cuerpos fueron arrojados sobre las
 montañas, lagos y mar de Chile. Un sueño quizás
 soñó que había unas flores, que había unas
 rompientes, un océano subiéndolos salvos desde
 sus tumbas en los paisajes. No.
 Están muertos. Fueron ya dichas las inexistentes
 flores. Fue ya dicha la inexistente mañana.
 (Hundreds of bodies were thrown over
 the mountains, the lakes and the sea of Chile. Maybe a dream
 dreamed that there were some flowers, that there were some cliffs,
 an ocean raising them safely from
 their graves in the countryside. No.
 They're dead. The nonexistent flowers were already mentioned. The
 nonexistent morning was already mentioned) (*INRI* 155)
 A literal reproduction of this poem, with the title "INRI" and a different verse distribution, can be seen in the book *Zurita* (601).
18. "*La muerte es amistad / La muerte es Chile / La muerte es responsabilidad / La muerte es amor / La muerte es crecimiento / La muerte es comunión / La muerte es limpieza / La muerte es mi corazón / Toma mi corazón / Nuestro cambio, nuestra ventaja / La muerte es resurrección*" (*La literatura nazi* 202–203; italics in the original version).
19. "Así pues, nos encerramos durante un mes y medio en mi casa de Blanes y con el último capítulo [de *La literatura nazi en América*] en mano y al dictado de sus sueños y pesadillas compusimos la novela que el lector ahora tiene ante sí. Mi función se redujo a preparar

- bebidas, consultar algunos libros, y discutir, con él y con el fantasma cada día más vivo de Pierre Menard, la validez de muchos párrafos repetidos” (*Estrella distante* 11).
20. “atardecer perdido de 1973” (*Estrella distante* 37).
 21. “Pero acto seguido, como engendradas por el mismo cielo, en el cielo aparecieron las letras. Letras perfectamente dibujadas de humo gris negro sobre la enorme pantalla de cielo azul rosado que helaban los ojos del que las miraba. IN PRINCIPIO...CREAVIT DEUS...COELUM ET TERRAM, leí como si estuviera dormido” (*Estrella distante* 35–36).
 22. “Tuve la impresión—la esperanza—de que se tratara de una campaña publicitaria” (36).
 23. “Aprendan” (39). The initial fragment of “Verás montañas en fuga” (*Zurita* 207), reminds us of the terrible learning of destruction: “Aprendan que no se salvarán de la sed de las montañas / aprendan aprendan a ser solo pasto para ellas.” (Learn that you will not be saved from the thirst of the mountains / learn learn to be just fodder for them).
 24. “una en Santiago, en donde volvió a escribir versículos de la Biblia y del Renacer Chileno, y la otra en Los Ángeles (provincia de Bío-Bío), en donde compartió el cielo con otros dos pilotos que, a diferencia de Wieder, eran civiles [...], y con los cuales dibujó, al alimón, una gran (y por momentos vacilante) bandera chilena en el cielo” (43).
 25. “Nuestro cambio, nuestra ventaja” (*La literatura nazi* 203).
 26. “Puede que en el aeródromo Capitán Lindstrom jamás se hubiera escenificado un recital de poesía aérea. Tal vez Wieder escribió su poema en el cielo de Santiago sin pedir permiso a nadie, sin avisar a nadie, aunque esto es más improbable. Tal vez aquel día ni siquiera llovió sobre Santiago, aunque hay testigos (ociosos que miraban hacia arriba sentados en el banco de un parque, solitarios asomados a una ventana) que aún recuerdan las palabras en el cielo y posteriormente la lluvia purificadora. Pero tal vez todo ocurrió de otra manera. Las alucinaciones, en 1974, no eran infrecuentes” (*Estrella distante* 92).
 27. “Las mujeres parecen maniqués, en algunos casos maniqués desmembrados, destrozados... Las fotos, en general, son de mala calidad, pero la impresión que provocan en quienes las contemplan es vivísima” (*Estrella distante* 97).
 28. Wieder’s individualism is one of his most pronounced psychological traits, as shown in the following comment: “Pero Wieder, lo sabíamos, no volaba en escuadrilla. Wieder volaba en un pequeño avión y volaba solo” (Wieder, we knew, did not fly in a squadron. He flew in a lightplane and he flew alone) (*Estrella distante* 55).
 29. “Evidentemente, Zurita nunca se ha subido a pilotar un avión. Sé lo que hizo en el cielo de Nueva York, pero él pagó para que lo hicieran. La diferencia fundamental con Wieder es que Wieder es piloto y además es un muy buen piloto” (Soto 112).

30. “la tradición de la ruptura” (17–37).
31. “las genealogías literarias que se establecen dentro de la novela—ellas son, al fin y al cabo, un asunto de vida o muerte para los personajes y el narrador—” (Fischer 154).
32. “Zurita crea una obra magnífica, que descuella entre los de su generación y que marca un punto de no retorno con la generación precedente, pero su escatología, su mesianismo, son también los puntales de un mausoleo o de una pira funeraria hacia la que se encaminaron, en los años ochenta, casi todos los poetas chilenos. Ese *dolce stil nuovo* pretendió ser renovador y épico y en algunos aspectos lo fue, aunque sus flecos fueron amargos y patéticos” (“La poesía chilena” 88–89).
33. “Zurita me parece absolutamente mesiánico. En sus referencias a Dios, a la resurrección de Chile. En su poesía él busca la salvación de Chile, que supone va a llegar mediante claves místicas o no racionales. Zurita le da la espalda a la Ilustración e intenta, formalmente, llegar a la raíz primigenia del hombre. Poéticamente, resulta muy seductor, pero yo la verdad es que no creo en esas escatologías” (Soto 113). The discrepancies between Bolaño and Zurita can be traced in the poetry of the former. In the triptych “Iceberg” (“Apuntes de una castración.” “La pelirroja.” “Victoria.”), written between 1981 and 1982, the night scenery of Chile serves as a backdrop for an erotic sequence, inspired by the polysemy of the term “Chile.” Bolaño himself explained the meaning of this manipulation in the author’s notes to his collected poetry: “‘La pelirroja’ es un intento de escribir a lo Raúl Zurita—las musas me perdonen—, pero en el territorio de las fotografías pornográficas. El Chile de ‘La pelirroja’ es el país que nombra, pero también es, en el caló del Distrito Federal, el órgano sexual masculino” (“La pelirroja” is an attempt to write in Raúl Zurita’s way—muses will forgive me—, but in the territory of pornographic photos. The Chile of ‘La pelirroja’ is the so-named country, but it is also the male sexual organ in the vernacular of the Federal District”) (*La Universidad Desconocida* 443).
34. “Cuando surgiendo de las marejadas se vieron de nuevo los estadios del país ocupado y sobre ellos al hepático Bolaño escribiendo con aviones la estrella distante de un dios que no estuvo de un dios que no quiso de un dios que no dijo mientras adelante la mañana crecía y era como otro océano dentro del océano los desnudos cuerpos cayendo el amor de la rota boca las graderías rebalsadas de prisioneros alzándose sus brazos a las olas” (*Zurita* 678).
35. “Vuestros nombres están grabados en el cielo” (Lucas 10, 20).

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Chapter 9

Roberto Bolaño's Big Bang: Deciphering the Code of an Aspiring Writer in *Antwerp*

Enrique Salas Durazo

The widely acclaimed technical virtuosity of Bolaño's style in the novels and short stories published since the 1990s maintained, to a certain extent, some of his early novels and books of poetry in the shadows. Almost a decade after his decease, Bolaño's international recognition as one of the most influential novelists in contemporary Latin American literature is still on the rise. As a result, interest in his early writings has gradually grown in recent years and has drawn attention of critics, writers, and readers alike.¹ Although Bolaño's poetry and narrative written in the late 1970s and the early 1980s has been seen by some critics as part of his "pre-history" or a mere precedent to his best writing, a rereading of the works from these period can provide important insight in the developing of Bolaño's later style.²

Among the early works, *Amberes* (2002, translated as *Antwerp* in 2010) is particularly noteworthy. This is the only book by Bolaño published both as a novel and in the form of poetry, and it is undoubtedly one of the most hermetic and fragmented works ever written by him. In fact, in one of Bolaño's always intriguing interviews, the author defined this work as "the only novel that does not embarrass me because it is the only one that is still unintelligible" (n.p.).³ Taking this into account, this essay specifically proposes to interrogate the manner in which *Antwerp* represents the hinge of the past and future of Bolaño's writing in order to track some clues for interpreting the intricate web of relationships between his early poetic intuition and the development of his narrative style. Specifically, by analyzing the possible meanings of certain narrative strategies, the careful assemblage

of stray sentences, and connections between Bolaño's early poetry and prose and his later work, this study will propose a reading of *Antwerp* from the point of view of a text about the act of writing.

In *Territorios en fuga: estudios críticos sobre la obra de Roberto Bolaño*, a cornerstone book of essays about Bolaño's oeuvre, Patricia Espinoza considers that "*Antwerp* is without a doubt the seed, the prequel, the degree zero, the more rhizomatic frenzy of Bolaño's work to this day. An exquisite, impeccable, and confusing writing that assumes fragmentation as the only possible option . . . a text that is an omen, a foreshadowing of what was coming next" (23–24, my translation). In a similar manner, in his review of *Antwerp* Argentinean writer Rodrigo Fresán—intimate friend and a well-informed reader of Bolaño—writes that this book is truly the origin of the Chilean's author prose, "the Big Bang" of his entire production. Accordingly, the difficulty and the hermetic nature of this text represent "a wink for the initiated, a code to be deciphered, not unintelligible but cryptographic, an enigma full of black holes that swallows all the light of rationality" (n.p.). Fresán's metaphor is very suggestive, and certainly it is in *Antwerp* where several of Bolaño's themes, images, and ideas about writing exploded and continuously expanded, forming the universe of his literary legacy. This is the reason why Fresán sees in this writing all the peculiar elements of Bolaño's style and an augury of "the narrator voice that reflects about the possibilities of his own future writing while developing a plot" (n.p.). Considering these ideas, a study of *Antwerp* can be very helpful in deciphering some of the clues related to the writing project undertaken by Bolaño in the early 1980s that definitely shaped his literary style.

Although it is possible to consider the book as a series of prose poems subtly related among them, as a novel *Antwerp* serves as a literary space in which Bolaño reflects about the act of writing itself by simultaneously connecting his previous poetics and experimenting with new narrative procedures. In his study about the strategies used by poets in their elaboration of narratives, Ian Rae explains that the novel can "serve as a laboratory in which an author develops narrative strategies, elaborates on personal sets of symbols, and refines themes that are employed in later novels" (6).⁴ Rae raises a particularly important point related to the transition from poetry to the novel:

[Poet-novelists] modify serial strategies to create narratives out of seemingly discrete units. These units are connected through patterns

of iteration (of diction, symbolism, and myth), instead of through causal connections between events in a linear narrative. The realists create fictional worlds out of accumulated details, but the poet-novelists create fictional worlds out of symbolic details (motifs) networked by poetic devices. The poet-novelists make an aesthetic out of what is hidden, overlooked, or unnamable within the realist tradition. Time in the poet's novel is non-linear, recursive, and stylized in a manner that prohibits the reader from depending on the protagonist's actions and consciousness to connect events and develops a narrative consciousness out of constellations of experiences. (25, 32–33)

Antwerp avoids plot development (at least in the traditional sense), constantly breaking causality, and recurs to accumulation of data in order to find what Rae calls “the hidden, the overlooked,” an idea closely related to the discovering of “the hidden layers of reality” of the *infrarrealismo*.⁵ The recurrence of certain motifs, which in some cases is directly taken from his previous poetry, and the active participation of the reader in the process of delving into the meanings offered by the elusive images, is indeed part of Bolaño's project. *Antwerp* demands an active reader who needs to focus his/her attention on every single sentence in order to grasp the possible meaning of the succinct sentences. In many ways, Bolaño's decision of publishing both versions in two different genres can be seen as an act of simultaneous evaluation of his early poetics and his late narrative writing.

While *Amberes* belongs to that period when Bolaño is already recognized as one of the most important Latin American novelists at the turn of the century, *Gente que se aleja* seems almost as a retrospective view of those years of formation, marked by poverty and disappointment, living as a poet devoted to the search of a literary voice while wandering in the aisles of “the unknown university.” As mentioned before, the original version of *Antwerp* is found in a notebook, as explained by Carolina López in the afterword of *La universidad desconocida*: “the section titled *Gente que se aleja* was already published by Roberto, with small variations, as *Amberes* in Anagrama in 2002 [and] the original of *Amberes* is contained in the sketchbook under the name ‘Narraciones 1980’ as ‘El jorobadito,’ dating from 1983 or 1984” (457). There are some small but noteworthy variations in the final version of the text that include the elimination of a few chapters and changes in some words and sentences.⁶ It is possible to argue that each one of the sections seeks for an attentive poetry reader capable of emotionally connecting to the fragmented images. As an

example of changes in the text, compare this fragment of the second chapter in *Gente que se aleja* with the version offered in *Antwerp*:

Carreteras gemelas tendidas sobre el atardecer cuando todo parece indicar que la memoria las ambiciones la delicadeza kaputt como el automóvil alquilado de un turista que penetra sin saberlo en zonas de guerra y ya no vuelve más al menos no en automóvil hombre que corre a través de carreteras tendidas sobre una zona que su mente se niega a aceptar como límite punto de convergencia dragón transparente y las noticias dicen que Sophie Podolski kaputt en Bélgica

(Twin highways flung across the evening when everything seems to indicate that memory and finer feelings kaput like the rental of a car of a tourist who unknowingly ventures into war zones and never returns at least not by car a man who speeds down highways strung across a zone that his mind refuses to accept as a barrier vanishing point the transparent dragon and in the news Sophie Podolski is kaput in Belgium) (*Gente que se aleja* 178, my translation)

The final version of the same passage in *Antwerp* is the following:

Twin highways flung across the evening, when everything seems to indicate that memory and finer feelings are kaput, like the rental of a car of a tourist who unknowingly ventures into war zones and never returns, at least not by car, a man who speeds down highways strung across a zone that his mind refuses to accept as a barrier, vanishing point (the transparent dragon), and in the news Sophie Podolski is kaput in Belgium. (*Antwerp* 4)

In the first example, the continuity is comprehensible but obscured by the continuous progression of the words and images, which almost follow an automatic writing approach. Therefore, it asks for a reader capable of mentally adding the transitions in this long sentence, which accumulates a series of enigmatic details. In the second example, with added commas and sentences, we get a more readable version without really modifying the content.

One of the recurrent features in the following works in poetry and prose by Bolaño is the reflection about the act of writing, the relationship between life and literature, and the literary representation of the writer “Viviendo a la intemperie” (“Living in the open”) in a violent world, fighting and constantly failing in the journey of becoming a poet. Bolaño’s early style is greatly marked, on the one hand, by Nicanor Parra’s *antipoesía*; on the other hand, by his experience as an “avant-garde” poet during the late 1970s with the Mexican group of

the *infrarrealistas*. Undoubtedly, important features in Bolaño's subsequent works are already contained in the very few poems published during this period. However, if the slogan during this time was proclaiming an iconoclast attitude towards the establishment as well as a combat directed towards a literary and political revolution, Bolaño's unstable situation in Spain during the 1980s gradually moved his writing into a more intimate direction. In the prologue of *Antwerp*, Bolaño states: "I wrote this book for myself, and even that I can't be sure of" (ix).

If there is one rule to be found in the construction of a work like *Antwerp*, it is literally that "there are no rules. ('Tell that stupid Arnold Bennet that all his rules about plot only apply to novels that are copies of other novels.') An so on and so on" (66). In his prologue, Bolaño's scorn for "so-called official literature" and for "arrivisme and opportunism" at that moment of his life led him to the search of "vain gestures" to be found in writing originated as anarchy. What seems to be behind the effort of compiling loose sentences, ghostly characters, and fragments of stories is precisely the act of writing as one of recovery of the lost, a useless gesture more associated with poetic writing that generates brief glows of knowledge within the writer/reader consciousness. Bolaño is working here with a kind of *memoir* in which the return to past events through the act of writing leads to more questions than answers: "Of what is lost, irretrievably lost, all I wish to recover is the daily availability of my writing, lines capable of grasping me by the hair and lifting me up when I'm at the end of my strength" (78).

What distinguishes this book from previous writings and some other books written during the first half of the 1980s, such as the prose poems in *Prosa del otoño en Gerona* (1981) and the novel *Consejos de un discípulo de Morrison a un fanático de Joyce* (1984), is the concision and precision of the sentences. Far from the verbal pyrotechnics of his few *infrarrealista* poems or the elaborated construction of plot and characters in *Consejos*,⁷ *Antwerp* works with ambiguity and silences, following the procedure of crafting enigmatic sentences connected in vague ways. As a result, the fragmentation of the narrative in *Antwerp* derives from the use of a series of symbolic motifs and narrative units that belong to an intricate web of meanings, avoiding causality throughout the text, and demanding an active (poetry) reader. At the same time, the use of different narrative voices and levels of narration is also noticeable. It is very difficult (and probably impossible) to fully grasp the meaning of each section, even when given referential content or even a coherent telling of a particular story. Because of all

this, an approach to the interpretation of *Antwerp* involves focusing more on the procedures and their function within the text (e.g., the functions of the sentence or a brief analysis of the multiple narrative levels), as well as establishing direct and indirect relations with both earlier and later texts by Bolaño.

One of the most challenging aspects in the reading of *Antwerp* is to define the number of narrators, due to the sudden changes of point of view and narrative levels in every section of the book. As a novel, *Antwerp* does not elaborate a plot or character development in the traditional way: it is more a narrative about the process of writing from the point of view of several characters. This would suggest a choir of narrators witnessing some of the same events in a particular time frame and space with different points of view, a procedure that Bolaño took to its extreme in his celebrated novel *Los detectives salvajes* (*The Savage Detectives*). However, the ambiguity of the characters and their ghostly presence in the text most of the time prevents the possibility of establishing exactly which narrator/s is/are writing the passage. Because of all this, another approach to the reading of *Antwerp* is to consider the text written by one implied author who creates every one of these writers as “masks” of his own narrative voice, as well as the rest of the characters that wander in his text and who reflects Bolaño’s own experiences.⁸ In fact, in Chapter 47, a section that contains some important clues about the text, the narrator explains the following: “All writing on the edge hides a white mask. That’s all. There’s always a fucking mask. The rest: poor Bolaño writing at a pit stop” (66). The tension through a play of masks and narrative levels is related to the common procedures followed by the poet writing narratives, a poet who “explores the latent possibilities within the lyric voice... a *doubleness of voice* [that] functions as something like the symbol of the author’s voice” (Rae 11). In addition to this, this statement strongly relates to Parra’s *antipoesía*, a poetic in which “the dominant voice, the ‘I’ is one and many at the same time, fragmenting itself in many discourses; an external monologue transposed in an internal one; a disguised actor performing and talking with himself... a performance in which also the curious reader-spectator is also involved”.⁹ “Bolaño” is a character in the text that appears a few times and just as the rest of the writers wandering in the book is a performer in his own writing, distancing himself from the events (or at least trying to do so) but ultimately unmasking for the reader.

One of the main themes in *Antwerp* is the relationship between the aspiring writer and the world, along with his attempt to express it by means of phrases and sentences belonging to a fragmented world that

the writer receives but cannot write. A series of unnamed characters, among them “the writer,” “the foreigner,” “the author,” and “the Englishman,” constantly struggle with their writing. Even if words suddenly appear in the mind of the aspiring writer from remembering, the “Memory slowly dictates soundless sentences” (33) or “literally appear like glowing ads in the middle of the empty waiting room like news on an electronic ticker” (58), there is great struggle in connecting the words in the text in order to capture the essences of the physical and spiritual world surrounding the character. Because of this, the narrator constantly expresses his frustration about “words that drift one from another” (7) and his incapacity to put them in writing: “I can’t string two words together. I can’t express myself coherently or write what I want” (12). One of the passages that perfectly connects the frustration involved in the act of writing and the shattering of the world is the following, in which an anonymous narrator talks about “The Englishman”: “The writer, I think he was English, confessed to the hunchback how hard it was for him to write. All I can come up with are stray sentences, he said, maybe because reality seems to me like a swarm of stray sentences. Desolation must be something like that, said the hunchback” (42).¹⁰ The “fragmented reality” experienced by the characters is accordingly expressed in the fragmented text of *Antwerp*, formed with “the swarm of stray sentences” that are found in almost every chapter.

The reality perceived by the writers in the text of *Antwerp* is also filled with silence: “Silence hovers in the yards, leaving no pages with writing on them, that thing we’ll later call the work” (62). The exploration of the possible meanings of those moments reluctant to being confined in the written page (a true act of poetic search) not only suggests the blurry borderline between poetic and prose writing in *Antwerp*, but it does become writing in these lines: “Nothing’s written,” *writes* the narrator at the end of this section about silence (62). The constant digressions and detailed descriptions of trivial events or objects that “interrupt” the flow of the text are, in fact, part of the exploration of the hidden layers of reality by the writer. The physical world, the marginal people, memories, stories not completely developed, the accumulation of written sentences, and the harsh reality of violence and crime that form the text of *Antwerp* are part of that world full of silences that “leave no pages with writing,” but is recorded in the text. Nevertheless, the blend of all these elements is carefully arranged in each of the sections in which there is an intention of internal unity even when the sequence of sentences appears chaotic. In many aspects, the poetic prose in *Antwerp* “pulls us up,

even if gently, at the end of each line, forcing an interruption on us at the end of each sentence”¹¹ in order to call the attention in every detail.

One of the main procedures in *Antwerp* is the inclusion of loose sentences in quotation marks as a part of the text confronting the concepts of written text and oral narration. In one of the two chapters completely constructed with quoted sentences, a dissonance between sentences seems to come directly from a testimonial voice and another one related to a more intimate kind of discourse is perceived: “‘He had a white moustache, or maybe it was gray’ . . . ‘I was thinking about my situation, I was alone again and I was trying to understand why’ . . . ‘There’s a skinny man over by the body now, taking pictures’ . . . ‘I know there’s an empty place near here, but I don’t know where’” (39).¹² The inclusion of loose sentences throughout the entire book has several functions. First, the sentences sometimes signal the reported speech of a character. For example, in Chapter 5 the loose sentences contain the direct testimony of some witnesses talking with the police after the killing of six young men; in the last part of Chapter 14, it demarks the words of the sergeant. Second, there are some clues that allow us to perceive these kinds of sentences as part of the written notes of an elusive author working on his text, but unable to incorporate all these bits of information in an organized manner. The idea of “thinking becoming writing” appears constantly. At the beginning of Chapter 7, for example, one of the hesitating sentences originated from the immediate monologue of the narrator (“The hell to come . . . Sophie Podolski killed herself years ago . . . She would’ve been twenty-seven now, like me”) is repeated at the end of the passage with quotation marks: “‘She would’ve been twenty-seven now, like me’” (10). There are other instances where the narrator “stops” writing his ideas. In Chapter 51, a first-person narrator who now becomes a character within a dream suddenly interrupts the second-person narration: “A girl standing in the door to your room, the maid who’s come to make your bed. I stopped at the word ‘bed’ and closed the notebook. All I had strength to do was turn out the light and fall into ‘bed.’ Immediately, I began to dream about a window with a heavy wooden frame” (70). The ambiguity of this section is the manner in which the writer becomes a character (who is writing him?) in a strange dream, moving him from the extradiegetic to the intradiegetic level. The two last sentences—in the original version the word “Regresar”/“go back” is in quotation marks—signals the return of the writer to the extradiegetic level as he writes the words of his dream: “You c-c-can’t g-g-go b-b-back. Go back” (70).

The fragmented sentences are components of the text and also generate meanings and connections to other ideas. “Façade,” the first chapter of *Antwerp*, can serve to explain the previous ideas because it contains in a nutshell many of the procedures used in the book. This is the whole chapter:

The kid heads toward the house. Alley of larches. The Fronde. Necklace of tears. Love is a mix of sentimentality and sex (Burroughs). The mansion is just a façade—dismantled, to be erected in Atlanta. 1959. Everything looks worn. Not a recent phenomenon. From a long time back, everything wrecked. And the Spaniards imitate the way you talk. The South American lilt. An alley of palms. Everything slow and asthmatic. Bored biologists watch the rain from the windows of their corporations. It's not good singing *with feeling*. My darling wherever you are: it's too late, forget the gesture that never came. “It was just a façade.” The kid walks toward the house. (3, italics and parentheses in the original)

In the first sentences of the passage, there are traces of a developing plot in which a character (“the kid”), an action, and a succinct description of the narrative space are given. All this is suddenly interrupted by a mention of William Burroughs, a powerful influence behind the writing of *Antwerp* not only in the conceptualization of love that is developed in *Antwerp*, but also in a certain use of the “cut-up” technique that assembles different sentences in *Antwerp*.¹³ The “plot” continues in the next sentences mostly trying to convey an atmosphere of decadence. Through the change to second-person narration in the sentence “And the Spaniards imitate the way you talk,” the narrative voice of a Latin American writer in Spain un.masks and reflects about his present situation. The sudden change to second-person narration demarcates another theme to be found in *Antwerp*: the writer in the moment of writing, apparently unable to concentrate in the fiction he is creating but keeping the sentences in his notebook. The aspiring writer writing about his difficulty in producing the text he/she has in his/her mind is not only one of the main themes of *Antwerp* but of his entire production.

The next sentences mark a return to the fiction being written and referencing the stability and boredom of people working for a safe establishment (here, the biologists), while “the kid” walking outside under the rain subtly refers to another issue that Bolaño constantly writes about: *el poeta a la intemperie* (“the poet in the open”).¹⁴ Next, the writer returns to his meditations, including a reference to Nicanor Parra's *antipoesía* (to avoid singing with feeling), the nostalgia of a

lost love, and the sense of failure of the revolutionary “gesture” never accomplished by the young poets of the *infrarrealismo*. Finally, adding quotation marks to a sentence previously written suggests the act of reading over again before rewriting the exact same sentence that began the passage. These last two sentences are very significant because they call out for the necessity of writing, even though everything seems “from a long time back, wrecked” (3). The idea of failure in revolutionizing poetry, literature, and society—a topic that is developed in several ways in the next works—also establishes relations with the lives of fallen poets like Sophie Podolski. The narrator, who thinks “she would’ve been twenty-seven now, like me” (10), reflects about the suicide of Podolski and bluntly expresses his dissatisfaction with his previous literary activity: “I’m alone, all the literary shit gradually falling by the wayside, poetry journals, limited editions, the whole dreary joke behind me now” (10). This quotation is a very intimate moment that reflects Bolaño’s disappointment with the *infrarrealista* project and the necessity of following a new direction in his writing. To relate himself to Sophie Podolski is very significant. She was born in the same year as Bolaño (1953), she published only one book of poetry (*Le pays où tout est permis*) after a severe depression, and she took her own life in Brussels in 1974. The connection that Bolaño creates with her in *Antwerp* is just a hint of his state of mind during his difficult life as an undocumented immigrant in Spain, constantly sick and thinking about death, as succinctly explained in the prologue of *Antwerp*.¹⁵

Another element worth looking at is the title of each section. In many cases, the titles emphasize certain elements and symbols within the text. Ron Silliman explains that “a title proper points or refers to the body of the text as a whole, whereas the caption *penetrates* it, highlighting certain elements within. This often occurs in poems where the title anticipates or repeats *in advance* key terms or phrases” (110; emphases in the original). He adds that the title-as-caption can be a strategy related to creating “meaning that does not stop conveniently at the borders of the text,” even in texts whose titles have no inner role but certainly relate to the body of the work as a whole.¹⁶ Most of the chapter titles in *Antwerp* serve as captions by directly establishing a key word or a sentence to be found in that particular section, alternatively adding clarity or ambiguity to its meaning. In many instances, the title simply points out an object that becomes the focus of attention of the narrator (“Cleaning utensils,” “The sheet,” “A white handkerchief”) or a relevant character or characters in the section (“The Red Head,” “The Medic,” “The Motorcyclists”).

Sometimes, the title registers a particular sentence or word in the section that is open to the interpretation of the reader who might find subtle layers of meaning behind it. For example, "Façade" simultaneously points out a simple element of the narrative space in construction, the mansion that is just a façade about to be erected, and the idea of a literary text also in the process of construction (3). In Chapter 12, "The instructions" is the element in the narration that impels a plot in which a detective investigates a crime scene. With no results, the detective reads the instructions again: "a couple of typewritten sheets with handwritten corrections. Nowhere did it say what I should be doing there" (17). The detective as a reader of a "sketched text" that does not help him to understand the events is a subtle reference to the act of reading as a search for solving enigmas. In many ways, the reader of *Antwerp* is following the same path as the detective, both confronted to a text that is reluctant to give clear answers. Some chapters may be understood a little more by relating the title-as-caption to the dynamics of the text.

One final example of the importance of the titles is related to Bolaño's selection criteria for the title of this novel. *Antwerp* is the title of Chapter 49, which starts with the story of an accident on a highway: "In Antwerp, a man was killed when his car was run over by a truck full of pigs" (68). The fact is that "Antwerp" as a narrative space or as a leitmotif is nonexistent in the rest of the book.¹⁷ Even more, from a certain point of view *Gente que se aleja*, the title of the original version of *Antwerp* and of Chapter 36 in the final version, would seem as a more apt and rounded title. "People walking away" contains some important images in the book (the group of waiters, the windswept sand, the deserted highways), characters (the writer, the hunchback), and certain important themes that are recurrent throughout the text (love lost, poverty, writing, and disappointment). However, it is possible to understand Bolaño's choice of the title "Antwerp," as an indication of the process of fragmentation of his own world, as a mode of writing, or a symbol of loss. The recollection of incomplete stories and voices that the author in the text works on is reflected in the structure of the chapter. The two initial sentences in this section are immediately followed by a string of loose sentences that superimpose this event with the frustrated love story of the writer: "She said she wanted to be alone and even though I was drunk I understood" (68). In the last lines, the first-person narrator finally unmask: "I wanted to be alone too. In Antwerp or Barcelona. The moon. Animals fleeing. Highway accident. Fear" (68). As the chapter title, "Antwerp" presents the strange relation that the writer

perceives between the accident and his personal situation. As the title of the novel, “Antwerp” demarks the fragmentation of a literary discourse, striped to the bare minimum, and the manner in which it conveys the internal struggle of the writer in the text and how he portrays this in the written page.

Bolaño also resorts to the use of the language of visual media in *Antwerp* as a tool of elaboration of the text. The verbal description of the still images of a photograph or the creation (or recreation) of movie scenes will be applied in a similar fashion in Bolaño’s next works.¹⁸ *Antwerp* lays out the implied author’s interest in translating the visual to the narrative discourse by directly using cinematic techniques in the development of various scenes. One of the effects arising from this is to consider the narrative point of view as a camera that zooms in and out, fades to black, does close ups, and even creates some special effects. In Chapter 18, a long scene involving two lovers in Mexico City (described with the precise movements of the camera) is superimposed to the events that narrator sees in the woods and his own reflections about failed love (26–27). In Chapter 25, the third-person narration follows a man who takes a bus. When the man closes his eyes, “a yellow and cold scene” follows with “the soundtrack” of birds beating their wings, and we “see” the man “walking away from the camera.” The final scene is “a close-up of the man with his forehead resting on the window” (34–35). There is also a direct description of scenes of a film with Nagas (75–77) being projected in the white sheet installed in the forest in the camping site, as explained in Chapter 15.

A notable example of a chapter written from a filmic standpoint is Chapter 26, “An extra silence” (36). The passage begins with a visual transition from the initial “fuzzy images” of the hunchback and the policeman, when they “begin to retreat in opposite directions” before a scene “black and liquid” appears. A voice over (“Una voz en off”) gives some information about “the South American” before “the screen splits down the middle, vertically” (208). The screen “recomposes itself” to show another scene and “someone adds an extra silence” (208) to it. The chapter suddenly interrupts here the use of the movie scene and ends again with some loose sentences written by the author. This whole passage is imbued with a desire of experimentation in creating a narrative that would visually involve the reader, but it is interrupted and left aside by the author. Bolaño appeals to visual media (movie, photographs, and television) as an element closely related to the plot and themes. For example, in *2666* the detailed description of movies about drug trafficking (302), a science

fiction film (323), or the first “unknown film” of Robert Rodriguez featuring a sordid rape scene (355–57, 405–406) act as commentaries connected to the deranged scenery of Santa Teresa. In some cases, a film or a photograph forms the central core of a short story, as is the case in some sections of *El secreto del mal* (“The Secret of Evil”).¹⁹

A final consideration in the reading of *Antwerp* is the relation that this work has with the poetry written (but not published until later) in the same period. In his prologue to *Antwerp*, Bolaño briefly mentions that “the original manuscript had more pages: the text tended to multiply itself like a sickness” (ix). The texts originated during this writing frenzy include many of his poems and some poems in *La Universidad Desconocida* unofficially belong to the text of *Antwerp*. In fact, the relationship between Bolaño’s early poetry and his narrative works is an important aspect to be considered in his work since some specific poems resonate in his later production.²⁰

There are some clear examples of poems that contain a character, a sentence, or an image that is more developed in *Antwerp*. “The hunchback,” one of the main characters in *Antwerp*, already appears in the poem “La llanura” (“The Plain”). Inside his tent in the camping site, he hears the reaction of “a girl” rejecting a proposition from one man and thinks about loneliness and sadness (81). In other poem (untitled), the verse “El autor escapó ‘no puedo mantener tiempos verbales coherentes’” (“The author let it go ‘I cannot maintain coherent verb tenses’” 101) reappears almost literally in *Antwerp*, now from the point of view of an anonymous narrator: “I remember a while ago reading the pronouncements of an English writer who said how hard it was for him to keep his verb tenses consistent. He used the word *suffer* to give a sense of his struggles” (44; emphasis in the original).

Another image from the poem “Mesa de fierro” (“Metal table”) appears in *Antwerp*: “a dream where people opened their mouth without making a sound”²¹ (*La universidad desconocida* 97). A first-person narrator remembers his “dreams of faces that open their mouths and can’t speak” (50, 60, 61). In “Mesa de fierro”, past and present events overlap by means of the changing verb tenses from verse to the bad memories of the place where the poetic voice was born are mixed with echoes of a lost love and the loneliness of the room in which there is a clean metal table. Aesthetically, the fragmentation of “Mesa de fierro,” constructed with incomplete sentences that always end with dots, reflects the idea of internal language that cannot be fully elaborated in writing. The ambiguity of the image entails Bolaño’s response to very intimate emotions that are obliquely reflected in the text. In *Antwerp*, this dream (or nightmare) serves as

an example of the manner in which connections between sections in *Antwerp* are established. A first-person narrator in bed with a woman tells her about how he “dreamed of a woman with no mouth” (15), something that she remembers later: “she closed her eyes when someone told her that he had dreamed of a corridor full of women without mouths” (19). In Chapter 27 “a nameless girl” remembers a man who told her about the dream “with a corridor full of people without mouth” (37).

Undoubtedly, one of the most important examples is “Mi poesía” (“My poetry”), included in *La universidad desconocida*. This poem not only develops some images and characters in *Antwerp*, but also reinterprets its visual aspect in the novel *Los detectives salvajes*:

Mi poesía temporada de verano 1980
 Sobreimposición de dos cines dos películas
 Sobre impuestas quiero decir el jorobadito el poli
 En planos similares quiero decir el barquito
 Hasta allí la mujer que prepara dos perros
 Cruzados en la escalera el mar freudiano
 Buque de vientre herido ¿picado por avispas?
 ¿cuchillos clavos pinchos? La voz dice baje
 esa pistola dos cines que se mutilan en la niebla
 el recuerdo de las rodillas de Lisa el vacío que
 intentó llenar (aplausos) el lento genio jorobado. (27)
 My poetry during a summer of 1980
 Juxtaposition of two movie theaters two movies
 Superimposed I mean the hunchback the policeman
 In similar planes I mean the little boat
 Until there the woman who prepares two dogs
 Crossing in the stairs the Freudian sea
 Ship with the hurt abdomen, stung by hornets?
 knives nails spikes? The voice says take down
 that pistol two movie theaters that mutilate themselves in the fog
 the memory of Lisa’s knees the void that
 he tried to fill (applause) the slow hunchback genius.

In this brief and very ambiguous poem, some of characters and elements present in *Antwerp* appear. The poem avoids punctuation marks and resorts to the accumulation of its components in order to juxtapose the images of a movie (apparently a thriller) with some painful memories related to a lost love.²² In addition to the text, the poem includes drawings of a line followed by a sine wave and a jagged line, figures that also appear in two chapters of *Antwerp*. In Chapter 21, one of the loose sentences explains the meaning of these

figures: "When I was a boy I used to dream something like this . . . the straight line is the sea when it's calm, the wavy line is the sea with waves, and the jagged line is a storm" (30).²³ In the following chapter, there is a more complete picture of that idea and the narrator explains again: "They alternated. The straight line made me feel calm. The wavy line made me uneasy, I sensed danger but I liked the smoothness: up and down. The last line was agitation. My penis hurt, my belly hurt, etc." (31).

Before publishing *Antwerp* or "My poetry," Bolaño recovered this drawing and transformed it in a central image in *The Savage Detectives*, one of his most ambitious novels of the 1990s. In this novel, this figure becomes a visual poem titled "Sión," the only published work by the *estridentista* poet Cesárea Tinajero, a character-symbol that represents what is remaining of one of the avant-garde poetic groups in Mexico in the 1920s. The visual poem becomes a bridge of communication between the iconoclast *estridentista* project (personified in Amadeo Salvatierra) and two young aspiring poets, Arturo Belano and Ulises Lima. Arturo, Bolaño's alter ego, immediately identifies this drawing from "feverish dreams" he had when he was little (*Los detectives salvajes* 375). He recalls: "When I was little, no more than six years old, I used to dream with these three lines: the straight line, the wavy line, and the jagged line."²⁴ The personal attachment to this "poem" that alternatively refers to illness and personal struggle becomes a metaphor for the lost poetic project of the avant-garde in the deserts of northern Mexico. Bolaño's nostalgic return to his early years in *The Savage Detectives*, an alternatively nostalgic and ironic literary memory of the failed poetic project of the *infrarrealismo*, is punctuated with a significant figure that expresses, in all its simplicity, the experience of undertaking the Mallarmean journey that follows physical illness, in a time when Bolaño was sure that he was not going to live past 35.²⁵

Antwerp, a hybrid text that requires an active reader capable of connecting the dots of an elusive plot while enjoying the poetic development of intriguing leitmotifs and characters, contains some important clues in Bolaño's development as a writer. As a poem, it works on the expressiveness of language as a medium of grasping the hidden layers of reality while experimenting with rhetorical strategies stemming from the writer's *infrarrealista* past. As a novel, *Antwerp* develops a plot that intertwines violent crime stories with the figure of a "detective-writer" trying to understand the sordid context in which he lives. But above all, *Antwerp* is quintessential Bolaño. Alternatively tragic and humorous, nostalgic and ironic, it narrates

the journey of the writer, his frustrations and loneliness, his discovery of a world inside the words and sentences that carefully writes and keeps. Considering all this, *Antwerp* is truly the “Big Bang” of Bolaño’s oeuvre, a poetic novel that sets the stage and encapsulates the germ of the author’s search for a voice in a time when everything seemed to be lost.

Notes

1. After his death in 2003, several works by Bolaño have been recovered from his computer archives, published, and translated to English. Besides Bolaño’s masterpiece *2666* (2004), four other books have been posthumously published: two novels—*El tercer Reich* (2010, translated as *The Third Reich*) and *Los sinsabores del verdadero policía* (2011, translated as *Woes of the True Policeman*), a compilation of Bolaño’s poetry—*La universidad desconocida* (2007, translated as *The Unknown University*), and a book with short stories and fragments—*El secreto del mal* (2007, translated as *The Secret of Evil*). Regarding critical studies about Bolaño’s early works, two fairly recent books analyze Bolaño’s poetry and its relation with his later narrative: Chiara Bolognese, *Pistas de un naufragio: cartografía de Roberto Bolaño* (Chile: Editorial Margen, 2009); and Monserrat Madariaga Caro, *Bolaño infra:1975–1977, los años que inspiraron Los detectives salvajes* (Santiago de Chile: RIL, 2010). In addition, there is some insightful critical commentary related to Bolaño’s early poetry in the following essays: Matías Ayala, “Notas sobre la poesía de Roberto Bolaño,” *Bolaño salvaje* 91–101; Ignacio Echevarría, “Bolaño extraterritorial,” *Bolaño salvaje* 441; José Promis, “Poética de Roberto Bolaño,” *Territorios en fuga* 47–63; Jaime Blume, “Roberto Bolaño poeta,” *Territorios en fuga* 149–66; Patricia Espinoza, “Tres de Roberto Bolaño: el crac a la posmodernidad,” *Territorios en fuga* 167–75; Cristian Gómez, “¿Qué hay detrás de la ventana? Roberto Bolaño y el lugar de la literatura,” *Territorios en fuga* 177–186; Roberto Contreras, “Roberto Bolaño (Santiago, 1953),” *Territorios en fuga* 203–32; Dunia Gras, “Roberto Bolaño y la obra total,” *Jornadas homenaje Roberto Bolaño* 51–73; Helena Usandizaga, “El reverso poético en la prosa de Roberto Bolaño,” *Jornadas homenaje Roberto Bolaño* 77–93; Bruno Montané Krebs, “Prefiguras de la Universidad Desconocida,” *Jornadas homenaje Roberto Bolaño* 97–102.
2. There are some harsh comments about Bolaño as a poet. In his essay, Matías Ayala writes the following: “El dejar de escribir en primera persona del singular le permitió sobrepasar los escollos de una lírica en la que no parecía destacar. De esta forma, se puede afirmar que Bolaño deja de escribir sobre poesía para escribir sobre poetas, para ficcionalizar su propia vida azarosa y su fracasada carrera poética en *Los detectives*

salvajes. Bolaño se sabe un mal poeta y publica para demostrar y atestiguar que ha fracasado” (*Bolaño Salvaje* 100). (By abandoning writing in first-person Bolaño overcame the obstacles of a lyric in which he was not standing out. Therefore, it can be affirmed that Bolaño quit poetry to write about poets in order to create himself as a character and to talk about his failure in *The Savage Detectives*. Bolaño knew he was a bad poet and publishes in order to prove that he has failed.) Other commentators of Bolaño’s early poetry are more positive. Bruno Montané writes, “Bolaño ha sido un escritor de magníficos cuentos y novelas, y también de poemas— aunque esta faceta o parte suya todavía es bastante desconocida por sus lectores- y parece claro que en estas manifestaciones de su escritura él no veía diferencia entre la poesía y otra cosa” (*Jornadas Homenaje a Roberto Bolaño* 98) (Bolaño has been the author of magnificent novels and short stories, but also a poet. This aspect of his work is still generally unknown although he did not seem to differentiate poetry of other kinds of writing).

3. My translation. See Fresán. “Pequeño Big Bang.” Rev. of *Amberes*, by Roberto Bolaño. *Letras.s5*. July 27, 2003. Web. October 9, 2012.
4. Rae’s study focuses on the works of five Canadian poets (Leonard Cohen, Michael Ondaatje, George Bowering, Daphne Marlatt, and Anne Carson) who at a certain point in their careers began to write novels in order to “overcome the limitations of their lyric practice by experimenting with the long poem, while at the same time developing rhetorical strategies that they subsequently used to shape their novels” (Rae 3–4). Bolaño’s development of his narrative style comes close to this and it is useful to consider his poetics in relation with the experimentation in *Antwerp* as part of the process that leads him to the writing of novels.
5. Among other ideas, the *infrarrealista* group of young poets in the mid-1970s in which Bolaño participated privileged the irrationality and the conversational poetry, the interest in the verbal organization and the distribution of the discourse, and the search of the hidden layers of “the Real.” José Promis has pointed out, the “infrarrealista principles include arguments that do not have an outcome in the traditional sense and causality is frequently substituted by the absurd in which characters of enigmatic or paradoxical conduct participate” (*Territorios en fuga* 54). The whole production of the infrarrealista period is compiled in two books: *Entre la lluvia y el arcoíris* (1975) and *Muchachos desnudos bajo el arcoíris de fuego: 11 jóvenes poetas latinoamericanos* (1979). See *Muchachos desnudos bajo el arcoíris de fuego* (13–36). About the infrarrealista movement and its characteristics, also see: Matías Ayala, “Notas sobre la poesía de Roberto Bolaño,” *Bolaño salvaje* 91–2; José Promis, “Poética de Roberto Bolaño,” *Territorios en fuga* 53–6; Jaime Quezada, *Bolaño antes de Bolaño* 60–62. The infrarrealista manifesto is available in the website <http://manifestos.infrarrealismo.com/primermanifesto.html>.

6. López does not specify which are these “small variations” in the texts of *Antwerp* and *Gente que se aleja*. There are a two small changes in the titles: the chapter titled “El policía se alejó” (“The Policeman walked away”) in *Gente que se aleja* and “Tenía el pelo rojo” (“She had red hair”) in *Antwerp*; The chapter “Automóviles vacíos” (“Empty cars”) in *Gente que se aleja* is titled “Barrios obreros” (“Working-class neighborhoods”) in *Antwerp*. More importantly, the final version of *Antwerp* eliminates three initial chapters in *Gente que se aleja* titled “Tres textos” (“Three texts”) defined by Bolaño “as a sort of prologue for *Gente que se aleja*” (*La universidad desconocida* 443). “Three texts” introduce some of the characters and their relation (“The hunchback,” “The author/The Englishman,” “the policeman”) and narrative spaces (Barcelona, the Distrito V, the camping site in the forest of Castelldefels). In addition to this, *Gente que se aleja* contains one chapter not found in the final version of *Amberes*: “El brillo de la navaja” (“The shinning of the knife” 236).
7. Bolaño and Porta carefully worked on the full development of his characters, the use of the leitmotifs, and intertextuality. See the prologue, pages 7–14.
8. In an interview with Mexican novelist Carmen Boullosa, Bolaño declared that he did not consider his own work as a self-portrait of his life, but admitted that every literary work is autobiographical and that “every character and their voices, reflect the voice, the loneliness, of the author.” See “Carmen Boullosa entrevista a Roberto Bolaño,” *Territorios en fuga: estudios críticos sobre la obra de Roberto Bolaño* 111.
9. My translation. See the introduction by René de Costa in Parra, p. 35.
10. Another example of this topic is in Chapter 13, where “a man” tells the story of a writer who loses the opportunity of getting married with the woman he loves because he is unable to write articles for a magazine to earn money: “He can’t finish a single article . . . Nothing comes out . . . the man realizes he is finished. All he writes are short crime stories” (15).
11. Helen Vedler, *The Harvard Book of Contemporary American Poetry* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 2. Quoted in Bernstein, *A Poetics* 40.
12. More sentences that directly address oral testimonies are related to crime and violence taking place in the city of the camping (8,10, 17, 26, 42, 43).
13. In his notes in *La universidad desconocida*, Bolaño points out that *Gente que se aleja*, the original manuscript of *Antwerp*, “is in debt with my enthusiastic readings of William Burroughs” (443). Although the “cut-up” technique is not fully employed in *Antwerp*, several sections in the book seem to be assembled with sentences written (often in quotation marks) by the internal author. In many

ways, Bolaño employs this technique more as an homage to the avant-garde desire of renovation and to reflect the shattering of the world that the Bolaño perceived after moving to Spain and his intention to portray it in his writing. Manuel Jofré, one of Bolaño's critics, has compared the aesthetic of Bolaño's poetry with those of the avant-garde describing it as a reaction to a "infamous reality": "El verso libre cobrará características desestructurantes de una realidad opresiva, pesadillesca, inclusive fosilizada vitalmente, utilizando la enumeración caótica, la lluvia de imágenes o las técnicas del collage—o su versión yanqui, el cut-up de Burroughs- todos ellos recursos deudores de las vanguardias, especialmente dadaísmo y surrealismo francés." See Manuel Jofré, "Bolaño: Romantiqueando perros, como un detective salvaje," in *Territorios en fuga: estudios críticos sobre la obra de Roberto Bolaño* 244.

14. The first poems in *La universidad desconocida* use the figure of "the rain" as an image that reflects the idea of the loneliness of the poet: "Créeme, estoy en el centro de mi habitación esperando que llueva. Estoy solo... espero la lluvia" (16); "La lluvia sobre esa ciudad extraña... huyendo bajo la lluvia" (38); "Guiraut de Bornelh la lluvia" (49). Bolaño also uses the figure as a metaphor of the situation of the Chilean poet "in the open" in two essays in *Entre paréntesis*: "A la intemperie" (86–87), and "La poesía chilena y la intemperie" (88).
15. In *Consejos de un discípulo de Morrison a un fanático de Joyce*, the main character, Angel Ros, further explains the relation between Podolski and the young writers: "La situación de los artistas jóvenes de todo el mundo, arrinconados entre la pobreza y el silencio. Puedes mencionar como mis antecesores a los poetas jóvenes suicidados. Sophie Podolski, Tristán Cabral, Philippe Abou y los que vayan saliendo" (*Consejos* 89). (The situation of the young artists in the whole world, cornered between poverty and silence. You can mention as my ancestors the young poets who committed suicide. Sophie Podolski, Tristán Cabral, Philippe Abou and many more.)
16. Ron Silliman, "Migratory meaning," *The New Sentence* 110–11. Silliman explains that Walter Benjamin first elaborated the distinction between title and caption in his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction."
17. The word "Antwerp" is mentioned in passing in Chapter 55. Significantly, the word was not used in *Gente que se aleja*. This is the passage in *Antwerp*: "The next morning she was not longer in her tent. Along the death-doomed European highways her parents' car glides. On the way to Lyon, Geneva, Bruges? On the way to Antwerp?" (77). In *Gente que se aleja*, it is the following: "The next morning she was not longer in her tent. Along the death-doomed European highways her parents' car glides. On the way to France? Swiss?" (77, my translation).

18. In fact, Bolaño will also use the language of films in the two other books written during these years, the prose poems *Prosa del otoño en Girona* (Prose from Autumn in Gerona) and his novel *Consejos de un discípulo de Morrison a un fanático de Joyce* (Tips from a Disciple of Morrison to a fan of Joyce), the latter literally crafted by Bolaño and A. G. Porta as “an adventure movie” including “cuts and editing” (*Consejos* 10). In reality, *Consejos* does not take this idea of “the novel as a movie” that literally and instead uses several kinds of writing, from letters to chapters consisting only of dialogues. Most chapters in *Consejos* are narrated from the point of view of Angel Ros, an aspiring writer who gets involved in a series of murders alongside a South American woman. Angel constantly juxtaposes his personal perception of reality with literary, filmic, and musical texts. Regarding to film, Angel works on his own projected novel by thinking in filmic sequences (41–42); in his life, he creates his mini-productions of erotic fantasies (116) and perceives certain scenes in slow motion (117, 169). In *Prosa del otoño en Gerona*, first published in the book *Tres* and after in *La universidad desconocida*, the narrator uses film vocabulary in the construction of two scenes. He “fades in black” and adds a voiceover in two sections (*La universidad desconocida* 275, 286). One section in particular not only explains the position of the character in relation to “the camera” and what “the spectator” sees but it is constructed using a cliché of romantic movies: the character leaving the city by taking the train after a break up. Then, “the scene fades” (286).
19. “El hijo del coronel” (*El secreto del mal* 31–48) is the detailed description of an extremely violent zombies movie related to the narrator’s biography; “Laberynth,” one of Bolaño’s finest short stories, comes from the analysis of photograph.
20. The poem “Lupe” (first published in *Los perros románticos*) is one of the clearest examples of how Bolaño’s poetry is incorporated in the latter narrative of the poem This poem was first published in 2000 in the book *Los perros románticos: poemas 1980–1998* (“The Romantic Dogs: poems 1980–1998”) and offers the condensed life story of Lupe, a seventeen-year-old prostitute who lives in Mexico City and has a sick child. Lupe will become an important character in *Los detectives salvajes*.
21. “Un sueño donde la gente abría la boca sin que se oyera ningún sonido” (*La universidad desconocida* 97).
22. “There is a secret sickness called Lisa. Like all sicknesses, is miserable and it comes on at night” (*Antwerp* 69). Lisa is another recurring character in Bolaño’s poetry and refers to a sentimental relationship he had in Mexico before leaving to Spain. See *La Universidad desconocida* 350–52.
23. Incidentally, there is another small graphical variation in the text of *Gente que se aleja*. In this one, the last section uses the drawing of a

little boat instead of the nonsensical “nnnnnnnn” in the final version of *Antwerp*.

24. “cuando yo era pequeño, no tendría más de seis años, solía soñar con estas tres líneas, la recta, la ondulada y la quebrada” (*Los detectives salvajes* 399). This visual poem becomes part of the journey of Arturo Belano and Ulises Lima and it is subtly integrated in the text. One example is the following: “my stroll sometimes structured itself in straight lines or in uncontrollable zigzags” (390). Amadeo Salvatierra also sees in the poem the “tossed boat” of what remains of the *estri-dentista* poetry (401).
25. See *Antwerp* xi. Bolaño’s own illness and the way he relates it to literature is thoroughly expressed in his essay “Literatura + Enfermedad = Enfermedad” in *El gaucho insufrible* 135–58. Two poems by symbolist writers, “Sea Breeze” by Mallarmé (“The flesh is sad, alas! And all the books are read. / Flight, only flight!) and “The journey” by Baudelaire, become an important subtext in many of his novels. For example, in *Los detectives salvajes* “Sea Breeze” is rewritten in Mexican Spanish—“Y después de coger a mi general le gustaba salir al patio a fumarse su cigarro y a pensar en la tristeza poscoito, en la pinche tristeza de la carne, en todos los libros que no había leído” (357)—and it’s also the core of the section in which Belano and María Teresa Solsona Ribot interact (511–25).

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