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Myerston, Jacobo

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# The classicist in the cave: Bolaño's theory of reading in *By Night in Chile*

Jacobo Myerston\*

*In his novels, Roberto Bolaño explores different forms of reading Greek and Roman literature by presenting fictional characters that relate to ancient texts in antithetical ways. In this article, I focus on one specific example of Bolaño's approach, namely the experience of reading Greek texts by a conservative Latin American man of letters presented in *By Night in Chile*. In this novel, Bolaño narrates the pseudo-confession of Sebastián Urrutia Lacroix, a literary critic and Hellenist who supported Augusto Pinochet. From his complicity with the dictatorship, a conflict of consciousness arises that the protagonist seeks to obscure with a particular way of interpreting Greek literature. Bolaño dramatizes this hermeneutics of concealing through Urrutia's struggle to suppress a disturbing image of himself that emerges while reading Plato's *Republic* and Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*. In this article, then, I investigate Bolaño's theory of reading, as it unfolds in *By Night in Chile*. I argue that Bolaño operates with a dualistic model in which there are bad and good practices of reading. The first consists of concealing the reader's vantage point, while the second leads to a recognition of the reader's self and his sociopolitical location in the world.*

## Introduction

Roberto Bolaño was as concerned with formulating a theory of literary criticism as he was with developing his own aesthetics. He achieved the former by introducing numerous literary critics, poets, writers, and painters into his novels, thus developing a metaliterary discourse. Bolaño's literary theory, which is coded in allegories and dense symbolism, should be of interest to classicists for two reasons. First, on several occasions, Bolaño's characters are classical philologists, classics amateurs, and poets inspired by ancient Greek and Roman texts.<sup>1</sup> Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, Bolaño developed his own reception theory with an emphasis on ethics, an orientation that is

\*Correspondence: Literature Department 0410, University of California, San Diego, 9500 Gilman Drive, La Jolla, CA 92093-0410. [jmyerston@ucsd.edu](mailto:jmyerston@ucsd.edu)

<sup>1</sup> In *Amulet*, Bolaño integrates the Mexican classical philologist Rubén Bonifaz Nuño, famous for his translation of the *Aeneid*, and the poet, dramatist, and essayist Alfonso Reyes, whom Bolaño calls the 'Greek of Cuernavaca' for his rewriting of Homer; also the protagonists of three novels are well versed in the Greek and Roman literature, including Juan García Madero in *The Savage Detectives* to whom Horace appears in an epiphany.

absent from most philological discussions. In his own brand of reception theory, Bolaño saw mainly two types of readers: the bad and the good. The first is characterized by resistance to the crossing of interpretative horizons as, for instance, those evoked by the ancient text and those produced by the modern reader. This resistance is rooted in a 'lack of courage' by the reader who fails to contemplate the mirror images that emerge from the intersection of ancient and modern perspectives, what Bolaño refers to as the crossing of 'gazes'. In this sense, reading the classics is not necessarily pleasant; on the contrary, it can often be a painful experience that reveals negative aspects of reality. The good readers, on the other hand, are willing to accept whatever the interpretative horizons mediated by ancient texts arouses in them.

Thus, Bolaño does not conceive the interpretative horizons that emerge from ancient texts as disclosing objective truths but as troubling manifestations that have the capacity to destabilize the reader's self-representation. This destabilization of vantage points opens access to unsettling aspects of reality, which the good reader will accept and the bad will repress. In this article, then, I explain how Bolaño unfolds this theory of reading in *By Night in Chile*. In this novel, the main character, a mixture of priest, poet, literary critic, and classicist, fights against a latent image of himself, which is conjured by two classical texts, namely Plato's *Republic*, specifically the allegory of the cave, and Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*.

#### **Bolaño and the classics: some background**

In his novels, the Chilean writer makes reference to a number of classical authors. This is most notable in *The Savage Detectives* (1998), *Amulet* (1999a), *By Night in Chile* (2000), and *2666* (2004a). Recently, scholars have begun to explore these references. Blanck, for instance, describes the allusions made in *Amulet* to Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, and to Plato in *2666*.<sup>2</sup> Rodríguez Freire has called attention to the fact that Homer's *Odyssey* is one of the main intertexts of *The Savage Detectives*.<sup>3</sup> Here Bolaño follows Joyce in bringing the figure of Odysseus to the level of the ordinary man; but this time the reader is confronted with a Homeric hero in the guise of a Latin American immigrant.

For those interested in a Latin American critique of traditional interpretations of classical texts, *By Night in Chile* offers perhaps the most important example. The novel presents the figure of Sebastián Urrutia Lacroix as the paradigm of the politically conservative reader in general, and the bad reader of the classics in particular. In political terms, he is located on one extreme of a continuum: on the side of the victimizers and orchestrators of political crimes. He is placed opposite those on the other extreme: the victims of violence such as Auxilio Lacouture, the main character of *Amulet*, Bolaño's Greek novel.<sup>4</sup> Importantly, Urrutia and Auxilio Lacouture are

<sup>2</sup> Blanck (2009).

<sup>3</sup> Rodríguez Freire (2012).

<sup>4</sup> Bolaño (2004b: 20) described Auxilio Lacouture as a 'Uruguayan woman with a Greek vocation'.

the protagonists of two narratives in which classical literature plays a prominent role. Both have in common their interest in the poets and writers of Hellas, but they approach Greek literature from opposing perspectives, which are differentiated by social class and gender. While Auxilio reads the Greeks from the angle of a poor poetess who lives at the margins of society, Urrutia does it from the vantage point of a 'prudish and clerical' wealthy Chilean man.<sup>5</sup> Intriguingly, Bolaño conceived both *Amulet* and *By Night in Chile* as part of an unfinished trilogy that aimed to interpret recent Latin American political history.<sup>6</sup>

Urrutia's antithesis, Auxilio Lacouture, who had emigrated from Uruguay to Mexico in the 1960s, makes her living as an informal worker who offers a variety of services to faculty in the Humanities Division at the National Autonomous University of Mexico. Sometimes she cleans the professors' houses, other times she does small jobs like typing lectures (*Amulet* 21). Her permanent but informal presence in the institution allows her to overhear academic discussions and to become involved in university life, but participating from the periphery. As an outsider, she not only reads and studies the Greeks but lives her life as an ancient seer in the style of Cassandra, warning about such future disasters as the massacre of Tlatelolco.<sup>7</sup> Thus, her reading of Greek literature is a marginal but vigorous one, which has consequences for the interpretation of her own reality. Contrariwise, Urrutia reads the Greeks from the standpoint of a conservative critic who submissively accepts the canon; he is deprived of the power to reflect on contemporary realities. From an elitist perspective, he sees the mastering of the Western classics as a matter of status, a list of authors to be dominated and controlled.<sup>8</sup> With this hermeneutic approach, which he not only applies to Greek texts but also to his own biography, Urrutia seeks to conceal from his consciousness the crimes that he has helped commit. For instance, after a military coup, he had assisted the Chilean

5 Bolaño (2001a).

6 Unfortunately, we do not know whether Bolaño planned to associate the third novel of the trilogy he never completed with some themes related to Greece, but we can be certain that these two novels build a unity in what concerns the location of the characters in the Latin American political spectrum and their relation to Greek literature. As Bolaño said in an interview: '*By Night in Chile* has the same structure as *Amulet* and another novel I may no longer write, whose title was going to be *Corrida*. They are musical novels - chamber music - and also plays written in one voice, unstable, capricious, devoted to its destiny, in dialogue with its destiny and perhaps, although the latter has probably failed, in dialogue with the three-dimensionality that is part of our destiny. This trilogy has not been finished, and remains a duet' (2001b). See also Lepage (2007).

7 The Massacre of Tlatelolco took place in Mexico City in 1968 and cost the lives of about 300 young protesters, and it was the subject of intense discussion among Mexican writers. On Tlatelolco, see Poniatowska (1971); Sánchez Fernández (2012).

8 The tension between Auxilio Lacouture and Urrutia's literary canons is the subject of an article I have in preparation. For Bolaño's subversion of Bloom's ideas of the Western canon, see Gras (2010).

Archiepiscopal College to eradicate Marxist priests (79). He had also personally lectured against Marxism to the Military Junta when the Chilean dictatorship was orchestrating a plan — most likely the Condor Operation — to exterminate Marxists in several Latin American countries.<sup>9</sup> In what follows, I will examine Urrutia's practice of reading, how it is developed in the novel, and the implication this practice has for Bolaño's dualistic model of reading.

### By Night in Chile

*By Night in Chile* is a short novel in which an aged and dying Urrutia goes through his memories seeking justification for his acts. In the form of a monologue, the narrator relates his life in seven episodes or short stories. In each of these stories, the literary critic and priest sees himself reflected in either a metaphorical or direct manner. At the end of the novel, nonetheless, he fails to find redemption from the guilt that has arisen from the crimes that he committed but refused to accept. The novel, rich in imagery of psychological repression, explores the mind of a totalitarian regime collaborator and is closely related to the historical confessions and testimonies delivered in Chile during and after the Pinochet era (1973–90).<sup>10</sup> The book was published in 2000, two years after Bolaño's first visit to his homeland after twenty-five years of absence. In 1967, at the age of fourteen, Bolaño had emigrated with his parents to Mexico due to economic hardship. In 1973 he returned to Chile, wanting to participate in the socialist project led by Salvador Allende, who had been democratically elected president in 1970. Shortly after Bolaño's arrival in Chile, General Augusto Pinochet ousted Allende in a coup, and Bolaño, like many others, was imprisoned. Upon being released, Bolaño went into political exile; first he returned to Mexico where his parents lived and then to Europe where he pursued his career as a novelist.<sup>11</sup>

As Adriana Castillo-Berchenko has pointed out, in *By Night in Chile* Bolaño reflects on his conflicting impressions left by the reunion with his homeland in 1998, a country in which democracy had been restored but where the echoes of the military dictatorship could still be felt. Bolaño articulates this reflection around a fictional character, Father Sebastián Urrutia Lacroix. This fictional name is a coded reference to Father José Miguel Ibáñez Langlois, one of the main literary critics in Chile during Pinochet's dictatorship who became famous for the reviews that he published in *El Mercurio* newspaper. Another central character in the novel is María

9 See Boero Vargas (2012a) and Berchenko (2006).

10 Compare, for example, the narrative tone of Callejas (1995) in her memoirs and that of Urrutia.

11 This is how Bolaño has portrayed his return to Chile in his short stories, novels, and interviews. However, in an article in the *New York Times*, Larry Rohter (28 January 2009) reports that some of Bolaño's friends in Mexico claimed that he was not in Chile in 1973. However, Maristain (2012) has corroborated Bolaño's account in a series of interviews with Bolaño's acquaintances.

Canales, a code name for Mariana Callejas,<sup>12</sup> a minor writer who became famous for her crimes and not because of her literary work. In fact, she was an agent of the secret police and participated in multiple political assassinations during the dictatorship.<sup>13</sup> In addition to these two characters there are other historical figures in the novel, including Pablo Neruda, the writers Salvador Reyes and Ernst Jünger, and even Pinochet. As with Urrutia's and Callejas' names, the Spanish title of the novel, *Nocturno de Chile*, also points to a specific time in recent Chilean history: the 'intellectual blackout' that was marked by the emigration of the intelligentsia after Pinochet's coup. At the narrative level, the story focuses on those literati who remained in Chile and were sympathetic to the regime. This situation of complicity evokes the memory of Nazi Germany, a resemblance that Bolaño exploits through the figure of Ernst Jünger, the German writer who participated as *Wehrmacht* officer in the occupation of France. At the conceptual level, *By Night in Chile* explores the relationship between literature, reality, and ethics, something that Bolaño achieves by drawing on Plato's allegory of the cave, as I will show.

#### Urrutia

To understand what Bolaño has to say about conservative appropriations of the classics in Latin America in *By Night in Chile*, we need to pay attention to the political and class-related attitudes of Urrutia. In addition to being an intellectual and Hellenist, Urrutia is an Opus Dei catholic priest,<sup>14</sup> and above all a man with aristocratic pretensions:

My name is Sebastián Urrutia Lacroix. I am Chilean. My ancestors on my father's side came from the Basque country, or Euskadi, as it is now called. On my mother's side I hail from the gentle land of France, from a village whose name means Man on the Earth or perhaps Standing Man, my French is failing me as the end draws near. (5)

<sup>12</sup> Notice the phonetic and semantic similarity between the names María Canales and Mariana Callejas (Canales means 'channels' and Callejas 'streets'). Bolaño is very consistent when elaborating code names for the characters of the novel; for instance, the last names of Urrutia Lacroix are Basque and French as are also the last names of his historical referent Ibáñez Langlois. The nom de plume of Urrutia's mentor, Farewell, is also based on the pseudonym 'Alone', which the famous Chilean literary critic Hernán Díaz Arrieta, predecessor of Ibáñez Langlois, used for the publication of his articles in *El Mercurio*. Ibáñez Langlois succeeded Díaz Arrieta as the main literary critic of the aforementioned Chilean newspaper.

<sup>13</sup> For the historical referents of the novel see Berchenko (2006).

<sup>14</sup> See Boero Vargas (2012a); Olguín (2010); Soto (1976) on the role of Opus Dei in the ideological development of the military and economic elites in Chile from 1970 to 1990. Notable is the contribution of Soto who interprets the poem of Ibáñez Langlois as part of a programme for legitimizing the violence that led to the military coup. Boero Vargas, on the other hand, clearly shows that Bolaño used the books of Ibáñez Langlois as sources for the creation of Urrutia Lacroix.

Three aspects define Urrutia's personality. The first one, which becomes clear from this quotation, consists of his identification with a traditional upper class that is proud of its European and colonial ancestries. The enunciation of European origins constitutes an act of distinction, in the first place from mestizos and ultimately from the indigenous population.<sup>15</sup> The second and third crucial aspects of Urrutia's personality, as I will show below, are his indolence, expressed in his disdain for social transformations, and his hatred of the poor. These three aspects are clearly manifested in his approach to ancient literature.

The effect of Urrutia's class consciousness on his reading of the classics comes to its best expression towards the middle of the novel when he falls into a melancholic state, a result of the many transformations that Chile began to undergo by the mid 1960s. During that time, a series of reforms were implemented that aimed to redistribute land and wealth among certain groups that had been traditionally marginalized. When this process begins, Urrutia stoically withdraws, seeking refuge in the Greek classics. In the following passage, which I have abbreviated but is almost three pages long, he intercalates with a telling detachment the readings of Greek authors and significant events of his time:

When I got back to my house, I went straight to my Greek classics. Let God's will be done, I said. I'm going to reread the Greeks. Respecting the tradition, I started with Homer, then moved on to Thales of Miletus, Xenophanes of Colophon, Alcmaeon of Croton, Zeno of Elea (wonderful), and then a pro-Allende general was killed, and Chile restored diplomatic relations with Cuba and the national census recorded a total of 8,884,746 Chileans . . . I read Tyrtaios of Sparta and Archilochos of Paros and Solon of Athens and Hipponax of Ephesos and Stesichoros of Himera and Sappho of Mytilene and Anacreon of Teos and Pindar of Thebes (one of my favorites), and the government nationalized the copper mines and then the nitrate and steel industries . . . and Pérez Zujovic the Christian Democrat ex-minister was killed and . . . the first anti-Allende march was organized, with people banging pots and pans, and I read Aeschylus and Sophocles and Euripides, all the tragedies, and Alkaios of Mytilene and Aesop and Hesiod and Herodotus (a titan among authors), and in Chile there were shortages and inflation and black marketeering and long lines for food and Farewell's estate was expropriated in the Land Reform along with many others and the Bureau of Women's Affairs was set up and Allende went to Mexico and visited the seat of the United Nations in New York (97).

In this excerpt the conservatism of the reading is expressed in two different ways. First, Urrutia reads 'respecting the tradition'; this means 'beginning with Homer'.<sup>16</sup> Second, he does not attempt to establish any connection between what he reads and

15 The choice of the last names Urrutia Lacroix is not unmotivated, since it mimics the surnames of Urrutia's historical referent, Ibáñez Lacroix (see note 12). In the Chilean imaginary, as Bolaño reproduces it here, non-Castilian European last names are perceived as markers of upper class status. This finds confirmation in discussions about class and names in Chilean internet blogs and fora. See, for instance, Uribe (2012).

16 Auxilio Lacouture would begin her own Greek canon with Sappho, a woman.

major social transformations that were impacting his world. In other words, he contemplates with distance and coldness events that changed the course of Chile and profoundly impacted Latin American history. These events were as important as a land reform in a country with a large number of landless people (*pobladores*), not to mention the nationalization of the copper industry, which still finances a significant part of public expenditure in Chile. Of equal importance was the restoration of diplomatic relations with Cuba during the Cold War, a sign of political autonomy in a time when the USA exercised control over most South American countries. Similarly, the bored mention of the assassination of political leaders is an expression of the critic's indolence. With equal apathy the Chilean man of letters couples his disengaged reading of the Greeks with the shortages and inflation that were induced by local elites and the US government, paving the way for the coup. For Urrutia, then, the reading of the Greeks is just an immersion into a frigidly imagined classical world that strongly contrasts with the distress of his social reality. Only on one occasion does he allow the Greek text to speak to him on a deeper level, which leads him to feel threatened:

... and there were terrorist attacks and I read Thucydides, the long wars of Thucydides, the rivers and plains, the winds and the plateaus that traverse the time-darkened pages of Thucydides, and the men he describes, the warriors with their arms, and the civilians, harvesting grapes, or looking from a mountainside at the distant horizon, the horizon where I was just one among millions of beings still to be born, the far-off horizon Thucydides glimpsed and me there trembling indistinguishably, and I also reread Demosthenes and Menander and Aristotle and Plato (whom one cannot read too often), and there were strikes and the colonel of a tank regiment tried to mount a coup, and a cameraman recorded his own death on film, and then Allende's naval aide-de-camp was assassinated and there were riots, swearing, Chileans blaspheming, painting on walls, and then nearly half a million people marched in support of Allende, and then came the coup d'état, the putsch, the military uprising, the bombing of La Moneda and when the bombing was finished, the president committed suicide and that put an end to it all. I sat there in silence, a finger between the pages to mark my place, and I thought: Peace at last.

In this succession of historical events and classical texts, only Thucydides can break Urrutia's ataraxic posture. For the Athenian historian locates his implied readers in distant times and conceives his work as a tool for interpreting future events, as he expresses it in the famous passage:

It may be that the lack of a romantic element in my history will make it less of a pleasure to the ear: but I shall be content if it is judged useful by those who will want to have a clear understanding of what happened –and, such is the human condition, will happen again at some time in the same or a similar pattern. It was composed as a permanent legacy, not a showpiece for a single hearing (Thuc. 1.22.4 trans. Hammond).

Despite all the problems that such a trans-historical claim may bring, Thucydides may be unquestionably right on this occasion. In fact, the internecine wars of the



Greeks could set into motion a series of associations when compared with the Chilean crisis of the 1970s.<sup>17</sup> In this context it is difficult not to associate those Greek farmers (as imagined by Bolaño) with the civilians against whom Pinochet directed his coup.<sup>18</sup> They were among the victims of a military violence that in Chile included kidnapping, incarceration, torture, and death. The image that Urrutia finds most troubling when reading Thucydides is that of the farmers who look at the distant horizon. In Bolaño's reading, this horizon is none other than the future that the Greek historian once discerned and the situation in which the Chilean philologist now stands.<sup>19</sup> Thus, the direct gaze, the eye contact with both the victims (Greeks and Chileans) and the observer (Thucydides) is something that Urrutia finds terrifying. This is so because looking straight into the gaze of the other implies an act of courage that, as Bolaño would put it, has the potential of revealing Urrutia's own complicity with Pinochet's regime. In other words, Thucydides' text turns into an unsolicited mirror in the process of reading.

Urrutia's reluctance to embrace the vision that his reading of the *History of the Peloponnesian War* has incited is symptomatically connected with a sense of radical difference that permeates Latin American elites. This sense of separation is continuously conveyed in *By Night in Chile* through the priest's hatred and disgust for poor peasants as well as indigenous people, specifically the Mapuches, and even the middle class of Chile's capital, Santiago. We can already see this in the first story that Urrutia tells during his pseudo-confessional monologue. As a youth when he aspired to become a man of letters, he visited the well-established literary critic Farewell in his country house. There, by accident, he comes across some old peasant women who rapidly recognize him as a priest, and consequently want to touch his hand. To the gesture, Urrutia responds with fear and disgust (18). Also, when facing a poor child with a runny nose in a similar scenario, he quickly averts his gaze in an attempt

17 When writing this passage Bolaño was, most likely, thinking of the *stasis* of Corcyra that Thucydides describes in 3.81–85. Urrutia could have established some analogies between the clash at the heart of the ancient polis and the political polarization of Chile. The division of Corcyra into factions of democrats and oligarchs, who were entangled in a deadly confrontation, and the intervention of foreign powers that fuelled the conflict could certainly be transposed to the Chilean situation of the 1970s.

18 Farmers are continuously present in the minimalist canvas of the Thucydidean campaigns but are rarely the focus of attention. Here again, Bolaño is pointing to the marginal. While in Thucydides the speeches of ambassadors, generals, and politicians are located at the centre, the farmers' fear for their fields is most often pushed into the background. Bolaño's reference to 'civilians harvesting grapes' is too diffuse to have a specific parallel in the Thucydidean corpus, but, like Aristophanes in the *Acharnians*, the Chilean author sees violence from the perspective of farmers who, in the Greek context, cultivate the vines of Dionysus, the god of community and peace.

19 With the mention of the 'horizon', Bolaño may be alluding to Hans Robert Jauss' work. Cf. Jauss (1970, 1990). As Bolaño acknowledged in an interview, he spent a considerable amount of time reading literary criticism. See Maristain (2010).

to overcome an overwhelming nausea (30). He feels comparable loathing for middle class workers he meets in the Café Haiti in Santiago's Downtown, whom he calls the 'scum of the city' and compares to pigs (93).<sup>20</sup> In the same vein, he refers to a Mapuche nanny as 'hideous' and 'of dark ways' (169, 179).

#### Shadows of reality

To illustrate Urrutia's predisposition against the crossing of the horizons of the literary text and his own life, Bolaño systematically draws on Platonic imagery. In a setting similar to the imaginary exchange with Thucydides, Urrutia finds himself involved in a discussion with his new mentor, Farewell, in which both interlocutors obliquely refer to Plato. In this conversation, the priest mentions the Greek philosopher in a situation that is reminiscent of the allegory of the cave in the *Republic*. The allusion to the famous text takes place after Urrutia's homoerotic initiatory travel to Farewell's country house, a journey full of allusions to Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Stoker's *Dracula* in which the authority of literary criticism is passed from Farewell to Urrutia. After this encounter, the critics convene again in the house of the Chilean diplomat and writer Salvador Reyes. There, Reyes narrates the time he spent in Paris as Chile's ambassador during the Nazi occupation when he met Ernst Jünger, the controversial German writer whom Walter Benjamin denounced once as a fascist.<sup>21</sup>

The central part of this story takes place in the atelier of a hungry Guatemalan artist whom the Chilean diplomat sporadically visits. In the artist's studio, Reyes meets a Jünger in military uniform who is closely 'examining a two-by-two-meter canvas, an oil painting that Reyes had seen innumerable times and which bore the curious title *Landscape: Mexico City an hour before dawn*' (49). The whole episode is marked by the contrast between the well-nourished figures of the German officer and the Chilean diplomat, and the starving painter. As Estève has pointed out, the scene mirrors the Nazi concentration camps in which prisoners could be clearly differentiated from their guards due to their undernourished bodies.<sup>22</sup> And indeed something similar to a concentration camp is portrayed in the painting of Mexico City, in which 'there were no human figures, but, here and there, one could make out blurred skeletons that could have belonged to people or to animals' (50), resembling 'an altar for human sacrifice' (55). Also blatant is the attitude of Reyes and Jünger, who do not seem to feel empathy for the starving painter and do not recognize that the city represented is not Mexico City, but the occupied Paris in which they are living. After having a conversation about art, and having agreed that the Guatemalan

20 For this comparison, Bolaño used as a source Ibáñez Langlois' poem *Ideas* in which one reads about the left-winger that 'He does nothing but eat and fornicate. / However, it is not a pig: / He has a greater gift that redeems him: his ideas / Although his soul rots.' Ibáñez Langlois (1971: 98). See also Boero Vargas (2012a: 58).

21 See Benjamin (1979).

22 Estève (2007).

will not survive the winter, both writers go to dine in Reyes' house, where they discuss 'literature sitting in comfortable armchairs' and where 'the meal was balanced . . . in gastronomic as well as intellectual terms'(57).

Since there are repeated allusions to Plato's allegory of the cave in the section about the hungry artist, as well as in the dialogue between Urrutia and Farewell that follows, and the final part of the novel, it may be useful to summarize here the text in the *Republic* (514–517b). At the beginning of Book VII, Socrates tells Glaucon to picture a group of prisoners who are confined in a subterranean cave. These prisoners are in chains and are facing forward, unable to look back. Behind them is a fire, and in-between the fire and them there is a wall. There are people behind the wall who are carrying all kinds of figures, the shadows of which are projected in front of the prisoners. Because they have been living this way since they were small children and have never seen anything else, the prisoners believe that the shadows depict real things and represent the only truth. If any of the prisoners are released and led towards the fire, so argues Socrates, they will turn and flee back into the lower cave, unable to gaze at the fire directly. But if a prisoner is coerced to leave the cave, he will gradually grow accustomed to the brightness of the outside world. After a period of adaptation, the former prisoner will be able to directly see the Sun, the ultimate cause of all things, which for Plato is none other than the idea of the Good itself.<sup>23</sup> In this process of being freed, the prisoner will recognize that the shadows he once believed to be real are but poor representations of real things.

As I mentioned before, Bolaño's first attempt in *By Night in Chile* to appropriate the Platonic allegory takes place on the part of the Guatemalan artist. With the purpose of exploring the relationship between writers, literature, and reality, Bolaño positions the true world (outside of the cave) in the context of human suffering, this is, in a European continent desolated by the war.<sup>24</sup> This is the equivalent of Plato's Sun, the origin of light that the prisoners will find outside of the cave. There is an obvious difference between Plato and Bolaño however: for the latter there is no idea of Good outside the cave, but instead a horrific war, one that in Bolaño's poetics is an uncoiled manifestation of the idea of Evil. The cave is then represented by the attic of the hungry artist, which looks through a single window over the French capital.

The Guatemalan painter, a true artist in Bolaño's imaginary, acts as the mediator between the two writers and reality. He sits for hours at the window and continuously watches the City of Light, transposing the horror of the war into an allegorical picture. One possible reason for this transformation of reality into allegory is that Jünger and Reyes, prisoners of their illusion, are not ready to divert their gaze from the shadows. Only the Guatemalan painter has grasped the true nature of the situation to offer Jünger and Reyes an image (*εἶδωλον*) in which they can see real things reflected. Hypothetically, if they were to become accustomed to this reflection, they

23 See Szlezák (1997) with references.

24 In *2666* Bolaño also draws on the allegory of the cave to question the lack of ethics of Mexican writers sponsored by the government, see Blanck (2009).

could gradually turn their gaze to the things that are being mirrored: a conquered Paris, and by extension a Europe full of human sacrifices. However, Reyes and Jünger, the educated recipients of the painting *Landscape: Mexico City an hour before dawn*, completely fail to understand what is beyond the canvas: they look at the image of the Latin American city in the same way that the Platonic prisoners contemplate the shadows projected in the lower cave, unable to establish the correct referent. While Jünger has no access to the vantage point of the painter, most likely because of his ideological connection to Nazism, Reyes' inability to leave his current state of mind and pass to one of recognition is the result of an internal weakness and lack of courage:

And when [Reyes'] eyes discovered the transparent line, the vanishing point upon which the Guatemalan's gaze was focused, or from which on the contrary it emanated, well, at that point a chill shiver ran through his soul, a sudden desire to shut his eyes, to stop looking at that being who was looking at the tremulous dusk over Paris . . . (48–49).

To some extent, Jünger and Reyes are the mirror images of Urrutia and Farewell, who had also failed to realize the deep misery they had fallen into when they supported and collaborated with Pinochet's dictatorship. After leaving Reyes' house and hearing the story about the Guatemalan artist, Urrutia and Farewell go to a café to further discuss literary issues. Their conversation takes place in the middle of an electric storm that produces random shadows, a sort of shadow play that Farewell associates with the meaning of books:

[Farewell]: What's the use, what use are books, they're shadows, nothing but shadows. And I: Like the shadows you have been watching? And Farewell: Quite. And I: There's a very interesting book by Plato on precisely that subject. And Farewell: Don't be an idiot. And I: What are those shadows telling you? Farewell, what is it? And Farewell: They are telling me about the multiplicity of readings. And I: Multiple, perhaps, but thoroughly mediocre and miserable. And Farewell: I don't know what you're talking about. And I: The blind, Farewell, the stumbling of the blind, their futile flailing around, their bumping and tripping, their staggering and falling, their general debilitation (77).

The two critics are also modelled here as the prisoners in Plato's cave. They sit in a café (the traditional cave of Latin American intellectuals) looking at shadows produced by the lightning (Plato's fire), trying to make sense of random images that have undetermined referents, signs that they cannot decipher. Urrutia and Farewell, however, are not bound in chains like Plato's prisoners. Instead, they could divert their gaze from the shadows and look straight at reality, if they wished to do so. But they cannot because they are trapped by their inability to relate literature to their own social reality:

[Urrutia]: Can you make out anything clearly in that shadow play? Can you see particular scenes, or the whirlpool of history, or a crazy ellipse? And Farewell: I can see a rural scene.

And I: Something like a group of farmers praying, going away, coming back, praying and going away again? And Farewell: I see whores stopping for a fraction of a second to contemplate something important, then heading off again like meteorites. And I: Can you see anything there about Chile? Can you see the future of our land? . . . Can you see our Palatine Anthology in that shadow play? Can you read any names? Or recognize any profiles? And Farewell: I see Neruda's profile and my own, but, no, I'm mistaken, it's just a tree, I see a tree, the multiple, monstrous silhouette of its dead leaves on the ground, like a sea drying up, it looks like a sketch of two profiles, but actually it's a tomb out in the open, cloven by an angel's sword or a giant's club (77–78).

Perhaps the most interesting part of this passage is Farewell's difficulty in making sense of these images, his failure as a critic and a mantic, especially about the future of Chile. Although the Chilean theme emerges superficially, with a reference to a local 'Palatine Anthology', a ciphered allusion to Chile as a social entity occurs on a deeper level in the symbol of a tree with dead, fallen leaves. But this symbol is beyond Urrutia and Farewell's comprehension. As scholars have already noticed, in this novel Bolaño uses the image of a dead tree barren of leaves to symbolize a betrayed Chile dominated by death and exile, which is also described as a 'sea drying up' and a 'tomb out in the open' (78).<sup>25</sup>

#### The cave of María Canales

The symbolism of the Platonic cave is further developed and reaches its most forceful form in the final part of the novel, an episode that takes place in the house of María Canales, the writer and hostess of literary soirées. After Pinochet's coup d'état had taken place and the dictatorship was fully established, Urrutia begins to frequent the literary parties that Canales throws in her three-story house, located in an affluent neighbourhood in the outskirts of Santiago. The gatherings are held at night during the curfew; this requires the participants to arrive early and leave the next day after the curfew has ended. Canales's residence is a typical Chilean upper-middle class home and is described as 'a big house, surrounded by a garden full of trees, a house with a comfortable sitting room, with a fireplace and good whiskey, good cognac, a house that was open to friends once or twice a week, even occasionally three times a week' (157).

These get-togethers, and everything that happened there, are the most unequivocal historical reference in the novel. The house actually existed, and well-known celebrities of Santiago's literary scene met there.<sup>26</sup> In real life, it was the home of Mariana Callejas, an unexceptional writer and far-right terrorist who describes with detail the place in her autobiographical narrative *Siembra vientos, memorias*.<sup>27</sup> In her book, Callejas confesses the crimes she and her American husband, Michael Townley, committed at the service of Pinochet's secret police DINA (*Dirección de*

25 Rodríguez (2009: 18); Boero Vargas (2012a: 18–19), (2012b: 171–172).

26 Peña (2010).

27 Bolaño used Callejas (1995) as a source for the writing of *By Night in Chile*.

*Inteligencia Nacional*). She hosted parties, raised her three children, and played the role of a traditional housewife in a house that was actually an undercover head-quarter of the military intelligence. The family lived on the third floor where the literary workshops took place, while the second floor was used as an office in which the elimination of political dissidents was planned. In the 5000 square meter backyard that Bolaño describes as ‘a garden full of trees’, there was also a laboratory in which specialized personnel experimented with sarin gas that was used in several assassination plots. In that house, the communist Carmelo Soria, a member of the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, was tortured to death.<sup>28</sup>

Although some historical details in *By Night in Chile* have been changed, the dramatic structure that the house evokes remains the same. Bolaño condensed the three-story building and the external laboratory into one single space divided into an upper floor and a basement, which replicates, but at the same time inverts, the cosmic dimension of the below and the above of Plato’s allegory. In Bolaño’s account, the intellectuals celebrate and read their poetry on the upper floor, while the torture centre is in the basement. These two worlds would have remained disconnected if it were not for the drunken guests, who at times get lost and open the wrong doors. In addition to the drunkards, there are other characters who freely move between levels, including Canales’ husband, the man in charge of the torture centre. Servants and children too, as in Buñuel’s *Le journal d’une femme de chambre*, can cross boundaries and see the whole picture: the combination of a comfortable life and the state-implemented terrorism that often lay at the foundation of modern life.

Bolaño then expands on the metaphorical handling of Canales’ house as an inverted version of Plato’s cave. In the *Republic* the prisoners are below, underground in a cave, and the real world is above. By contrast, the Chilean intellectuals are in the upper floor of the house, and the true world resides in the basement below. It is precisely there, in the inferno, where reality is located. Above, in the comfortable living room of the literary soirée, illusion or, more precisely, neglect reigns. It is not just a matter of the guests not knowing that they are gathering in a torture centre, as these facilities abounded at that time in Chile: it is simply that they do not want to know it. As the poet Pedro Lemebel wrote:

It is possible to believe that many of these guests did not really know where they were, but most of the country knew the vulturish flapping of cars without plates. These DINA taxis that collected passengers during the curfew. All Chile knew and said nothing, something had been told, something was said, some chat in a cocktail, some gossip of a censored painter. Everyone looked and preferred not to look, not to know, not to hear these horrors that were leaked through the foreign press. These barracks upholstered with plugs and bloody hooks, those graves of twisted bodies. It was too terrible to be believed. In this country so well-educated, of writers and poets, those things do not happen, pure sensationalist literature,

28 See Berchenko (2006); Castillo-Berchenko (2006).

pure Marxist propaganda to discredit the government, said Mariana raising the music volume to silence the strangled moans that leaked from the garden.<sup>29</sup>

Bolaño exemplifies this intriguing attitude of the Chilean conservative intelligentsia in a masterful manner when he writes about a guest who got lost in the halls of Canales' house:

He arrived at that door at the end of a dimly lit corridor, and opened it and came across that body tied to a metal bed, abandoned in that basement, but alive, and the playwright or the actor shut the door stealthily, trying not to wake the poor man who was recuperating from his ordeal, and retraced his steps and returned to the party or the literary gathering, María Canales's soirée, without saying a word (176).

And later he retells the descent to the inferno from a different perspective:

He opened the door and saw the man tied to the metal bed, blindfolded, and he knew the man was alive because he could hear him breathing, although he wasn't in good shape, for in spite of the dim light he saw the wounds, the raw patches, like eczema, but it wasn't eczema, the battered parts of his anatomy, the swollen parts, as if more than one bone had been broken, but he was breathing, he certainly didn't look like he was about to die, and then the theorist of avant-garde theater shut the door delicately, without making a noise, and started to make his way back to the sitting room, carefully switching off as he went each of the lights he had previously switched on (177).

In both passages, the act of concealing what has been discovered is striking. The person who has seen what is really taking place in the house 'retraces his steps' returning to the party, pretending that he has not seen anything 'without saying a word'. And after 'carefully switching off as he went each of the lights he had previously switched on', he makes his way back to the sitting room (Plato's cave) without making a noise. The undoing of the path from the realm of truth to that of illusion runs parallel to the initial pain and inertia that the Platonic prisoner experiences when he is first liberated and turned towards the light that generates the shadows:

And if he were forced to look at the light itself would his eyes not be in pain, and would he not turn away and flee to those things which he is able to discern and regard as in reality were more clear than what is revealed? (515e.1-4 ed. Burnet)

Thus, the instinct of the person who has just been set free is to return to his previous position, to what he is accustomed to: in the Platonic imaginary this means to the play of shadows; in Bolaño's it means to a world of conformity that is sustained by denial. With his appropriation of the allegory of the cave, then, Bolaño flays those who have seen Evil but do not transform their vision into knowledge, failing to put into

29 Lemebel (1998).

articulated speech what has been unveiled. And although Urrutia denies having seen the basement, it is he who reports about the lost guests who had access to the lower levels of the house. This being considered, one would be tempted to assume that Urrutia shares some responsibility for the crimes committed in the infamous house. For he knew what was taking place there and he neither opposed nor denounced it. Accordingly, this would be the crime that torments the priest's consciousness and determines the narrative tone of the whole novel; but this is not the case.

#### The actual crime

Despite all appearances, Urrutia's most significant offense is not just to have become a collaborator by not speaking out the truth. On at least two occasions, Bolaño tells us that Urrutia was deeply involved in activities that contributed directly to the assassination of leftist militants. Prior to the military coup and some time thereafter, a couple of gloomy characters, who seem to work for a foreign intelligence service and for the elites involved in the conspiracy, approach Urrutia with two troubling propositions. First Mr. Odeim and Mr. Oido, whose names are palindromes of the Spanish *Miedo* (fear) and *Odio* (hatred) send Urrutia to Europe with the purpose of learning how to neutralize some troublesome pigeons, which were polluting catholic churches with their excrement.<sup>30</sup> On the old continent, the Chilean priest studies a counterinsurgent strategy based on the use of falcons for annihilating the offending birds. After the coup, Odeim and Oido invite the critic to teach Pinochet and other generals about Marxism as part of a concerted action against the socialists. In his lectures to them, Urrutia explains the work not only of Marx, but also of the Chilean theorist Marta Harnecker who was forced into exile after the fall of Allende.<sup>31</sup>

The story of the pigeons and falcons is, as one may suspect, an allusion to the fight that Pope John Paul II and Cardinal Ratzinger led against liberation theology, based on a Latin American interpretation of the *New Testament*. As Boff has put it, this theology is 'an examination of the whole scripture from the viewpoint of the oppressed',<sup>32</sup> which accordingly regards Jesus as the first revolutionary, a model fighter for the poor and liberator from oppression. Perhaps the most important aspect of this allegory is the way in which Urrutia embellishes, or more precisely, twists the truth about an important episode in his life, projecting onto Europe a violence that was planned in the 'first world' but that was in fact executed in Latin America. According to his fantasized version of the events, it was not in Chile and the rest of

30 Besides the allegorical meaning of these personifications, which imply that Urrutia was driven in his action by Fear and Hatred, these two names may also evoke the political slogan '*juntemos odio*', 'Let's unite our hate', that was used in a psychological operation in preparation for the coup. See Benmiloud (2010: 241); Berchenko (2006: 19).

31 Marta Harnecker is one of the most influential Marxist thinkers of Latin America with more than eighty publications. She was involved in the Cuban revolution, and has acted as a consultant in the recent Bolivian and Venezuelan processes.

32 Boff (1987: 32).



the Americas where conservative priests spiritually lead falcons (the military) against pigeons (leftist priests) and their followers (the starlings).<sup>33</sup> This is best exemplified when Urrutia recounts a visit to Avignon where he observes the following:

[The falcon] Ta Gueule in full flight, scattering not just flocks of pigeons but also flocks of starlings . . ., appeared again like a lightning bolt, or the abstract idea of a lightning bolt, and swooped on the huge flocks of starlings coming out of the west like swarms of flies, darkening the sky with their erratic fluttering, and after a few minutes the fluttering of the starlings was bloodied, scattered and bloodied, and <the> afternoon on the outskirts of Avignon took on a deep red hue, like the color of sunsets seen from an airplane, or the color of dawns, when the passenger is woken gently by the engines whistling in his ears and lifts up the little blind and sees the horizon marked with a red line, like the planet's femoral artery, or the planet's aorta, gradually swelling, and I saw that swelling blood vessel in the sky over Avignon, the blood-stained flight of the starlings, Ta Gueule splashing color like an abstract expressionist painter, ah, the peace, the harmony of nature, nowhere as evident or as unequivocal as in Avignon (61).

This allegorical image begins with the falcon Ta Gueule, a name with a double reference. By phonetic similarity, it alludes to Father Tagle, Archbishop of the city of Valparaiso and Pinochet's supporter. By the meaning of the French expression, the name Ta Gueule (Shut Up!) is an unequivocal reference to the Vatican censorship of rebellious priests. As we know, during the last decades of the twentieth century prominent liberation theologians were prohibited by the Catholic Church from discussing their writings, teaching in universities and seminars, and saying mass. On the other hand, the attacks of the bird of prey on the pigeons and the starlings point to the assassination of priests and parishioners, who are symbolically represented in the story as 'swarms of flies'. This clearly refers to the assassinations of priests and their followers by military forces that occurred not only in Chile but also in other parts of Latin America at roughly the same time. In Chile, one of the most notorious cases was that of Father Antonio Llidó, who was imprisoned, tortured, and disappeared in 1974.<sup>34</sup> The assassination of Archbishop Óscar Romero and the failed attack against the theologian Jon Sobrino in Central America may also have resounded in Bolaño's mind when writing this passage.

As in the case of the painting of the Guatemalan artist, the geography of the event has been dislocated: the Latin American tragedy has been projected into Avignon. This time, however, it is not with the purpose of facilitating an understanding of a reality, but of concealing it. And there is a good reason why Urrutia would not look straight at his actions, since his engagement in theorizing persecution and advising of the military had transnational consequences and implications that not only affected Chile, but the whole continent. Although Urrutia is fictional, Bolaño makes

33 See Estève (2007) for the symbolic relationship of the falcon and the military in *By Night in Chile*.

34 See Amorós (2007).

clear that the story has a historical framework that allows a series of quasi-historical inferences about the novel's characters. Even if the consequences of Urrutia's actions cannot be directly associated with the shocking events we know, those of his referential double, priest and critic Ibáñez Langlois, may have had a true impact on Pinochet's and other totalitarian governments of the region. In fact, it is rumoured in Chile that Ibáñez Langlois gave in actuality such lectures on Marxism to Pinochet.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, the historical referent of Urrutia published several books against liberation theology. In the introduction to his *Teología de la liberación y lucha de clases* (1985), he admits the possibility that his writings could have instigated political persecution. But although he ponders the possible implications of his intellectual work, Ibáñez Langlois, like Urrutia Lacroix, prefers to deny it with convoluted arguments.

But although concealment may reveal a certain sense of guilt, a tension between repentance and pleasure pervades the shadowy image of the self that Urrutia has created. Even if the purpose of the 'pigeon allegory' is to conceal the priest's participation in the bloodbath, the comparison of the falcon with an expressionist painter at the end of the quoted passage betrays the joy that the critic and priest experienced when visualizing the extermination of liberation theologians and their followers. It is precisely this image of the self that is threatened by the crossing of gazes when reading the Greeks, since the merging of the historical horizons of ancient texts and the modern readers implies, to some degree, the discovery of the self in the other. Thus, Urrutia's simulacrum, as Bolaño wants us to think, is fragile; it is vulnerable to the destabilizations that engaged reading could produce.

### The critique of the literary system

At end of the novel, confronted with the problem of responsibility, María Canales says to Urrutia in reference to the use of her home as a torture centre: 'that is how literature is made in Chile' (184), implying that literary production involves a selective perception of a social reality built on questionable foundations. To this Urrutia adds:

That is how literature is made in Chile, but not just in Chile, in Argentina and Mexico too, in Guatemala and Uruguay, in Spain and France and Germany, in green England and carefree Italy. That is how literature is made. Or at least what we call literature, to keep ourselves from falling into the dump (186).

With this, Bolaño wants to make sure that the reader does not confine to Chile his critiques of the literary system, a system composed of writers and readers, and everything that has repercussions in literary production. The confluence of legitimization of power, torture, and denial in which intellectuals have often been involved is, in his view, a central issue in the Western world. Bolaño emphasizes

35 Oral communication of Professor Jaime Concha.

this point many times in *By Night in Chile* by linking Chilean and European fascism, highlighting the role of the Vatican in the persecution of liberationist movements, and by pointing to the involvement of the USA in the coup against Allende and the torturing of Chilean dissidents; this last aspect is made clear through the figure of the American husband of María Canales who runs the secret prison in the basement.

That being said, it may also be wise not to fully identify Urrutia's voice with Bolaño's, who championed a different kind of literature, one that does not turn its back to the real as it manifests itself, for instance, in the victims of torture.<sup>36</sup> For Bolaño 'the good writer must have the courage to look in a black mirror', this means to recognize where he stands on ethical terms.<sup>37</sup> In this sense, neither María Canales nor Urrutia are good literati nor is what they call 'literature' true literature. As Bolaño said in an interview, true literature must be reflexive, this means 'texts must have mirrors where they look at themselves; where the text will look at itself and also see what is behind it'.<sup>38</sup> These mirrors are not only the intratextual and intertextual relationships, but also the mirrors of the reader's consciousness and the referential relationship between the text and the historical reality of the reader. And here it is precisely where Urrutia's writing, reading, and thinking fails to be true because he as a reader is incapable of seeing himself reflected in the mirrors that both literature and his own biography offer to him. In failing to acknowledge the implications that both the Thucydidean and Platonic texts have for the exploration of his own situation in the world, Urrutia confines himself to a sort of hell in which he identifies with the crimes he has helped to commit, but at the same time is tormented by guilt. The Platonic allegory, if used as a mirror, would have allowed him to see himself in the lower part of the cave, as he actually is, gazing at illusory shadows. Turning his head back to the light would have had revealed to him those 'barracks upholstered with plugs and bloody hooks, those graves of twisted bodies' that were produced by the political system he endorsed.

To conclude, in *By Night in Chile* Bolaño explores what constitutes a poor reading of literature, its implication and its mechanics. Interestingly, he articulates his exploration around the reading of Greek texts in a novel that was part of an unfinished trilogy in which he hoped to address issues related to Latin American political history. Fortunately, Bolaño was able to finish *Amulet*, a work that examines the antithesis of Urrutia's attitude towards literature and politics. In *Amulet*, Auxilio

36 Villalobos-Ruminott (2009), for instance, has wrongly identified Bolaño's voice with that of his negative characters, introducing the idea of co-belonging. According to this critic, for Bolaño 'Literature does not save but condemns us to be part of the very logic of global violence, and this exhaustion of hopes in literature.' But this interpretation misreads Bolaño's dualist cosmology in which there is a clear separation between good and evil that divides the literary world. Cf. Bolaño (1999b). Bolaño's archaic dualism may indeed be disappointing to postmodernist theorists.

37 Bolaño (1999b).

38 Ibid.

Lacouture, a homeless poetess, brings to its last consequences Bolaño's proposed mirroring practice of reading: she reads the Greeks from Sappho to Seferis, from past to present, turning herself into a Latin American Cassandra who predicts and condemns the chain of retributive violence that men like Urrutia have set in motion.

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