“El vencedor es Dioniso”: The Aesthetics of Balance in the Works of Roberto Bolaño

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Abstract

Recent critical commentary on the works of Roberto Bolaño has addressed what has been called his "post-political" aesthetic from the standpoint of literary complicity with authoritarian violence, particularly in works such as *Nocturno de Chile, Estrella distante* and *Amuleto*. In some cases, critics have foregrounded the notion that the social marginalization of his writer-protagonists suggests the inability of literature to engage meaningfully with political reality as a vehicle of resistance. This study proposes a reading of Bolaño's body of work that situates this interplay between the literary and the political in the broader context of the Nietzschean dialectic between Apollo and Dionysus, which may be used to explore more adequately a recurring tension between literature as potentially enlightening and humanizing, on one hand, and subject to corruption by larger ideological forces on the other.

The first chapter of this dissertation focuses on two short stories, "El gaucho insufrible" and "El viaje de Álvaro Rousselot," and shows how Bolaño invokes the Apollo-Dionysus dialectic to challenge distinctions between civilization and barbarism in contemporary Argentine narrative and suggest an aesthetic vision that transcends questions of national identity. In the second chapter I explore Bolaño's treatment of political engagement in *Nocturno de Chile* and *Monsieur Pain*, in which the protagonists' attempts to sever literature from its sociopolitical context lead to varying states of madness, moral dissolution and aesthetic crisis. The third chapter addresses Bolaño's use of laughter in *Amuleto* and *El Tercer Reich*; I draw from a range of theoretical approaches to show how laughter both exposes and collapses notions of authoritative distance and elevation, which are bound up in Apollonian suggestions of narrative control and formal unity. The fourth chapter explores the erotic subtext of *2666*, which, I argue, is closely tied to a destabilizing neoliberal economic framework of unchecked consumerism.

Ultimately, I show how the Apollo-Dionysus dialectic points to an aesthetic of balance, in which literary endeavor, often circumscribed by the rational connotations of the detective search, reconfigures political resistance as an act of enlightenment aimed at the transformation of individual consciousness.

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Table of Contents

Introduction 1

Chapter 1 Dreaming of Proust: Modernization and the Search for Civilization in “El gaucho insufrible” and “El viaje de Álvaro Rousselot” 16

Chapter 2 “No hay consuelo en los libros”: Fascism and Literary Crisis in *Nocturno de Chile* and *Monsieur Pain* 57

Chapter 3 Laughter and the Aesthetics of Elevation in *Amuleto* and *El Tercer Reich* 95

Chapter 4 Illness, Desire and Dissolution in *2666* 136

Conclusion 180

Works Cited 187

Introduction

In an essay published not long before his untimely death, Roberto Bolaño wrote: "Escribir sobre la enfermedad, sobre todo si uno está gravemente enfermo, puede ser un suplicio. Escribir sobre la enfermedad si uno, además de estar gravemente enfermo, es hipocondriaco, es un acto de masoquismo o de desesperación. Pero también puede ser un acto liberador" ("Literatura + enfermedad" 136). Viewed through the lens of posthumous accounts documenting his deteriorating state of health as he feverishly worked to finish the sprawling *2666* (2006), the quote is highly suggestive of Bolaño's conflicted attitude toward writing during this last stage of his life. It is seen at times as a prolonged journey punctuated by suffering, merely a distraction to temporarily fend off death, while on the other hand it is clear that writing was, in essence, an act of liberation for him.

Later in the same essay, Bolaño offers an analysis of a poem by Baudelaire called "Le voyage," in which he ultimately concludes that Baudelaire saw no hope of relief or transformation in the notion of the voyage. The sick man embarks in the spirit of adventure, hoping to heal himself, but returns home sicker and crazier than before. Significantly, Bolaño uses one of the poem's lines as an epigraph to *2666*: "¡En desiertos de tedio, un oasis de horror!" In Bolaño's interpretation of the line, this is precisely "la enfermedad del hombre moderno" ("Literatura + enfermedad" 151). In other words, the voyage embarked upon as an antidote to boredom ultimately leaves the traveler in frustration and despair. It is difficult, then, to read *2666* without reflecting on this deeply fatalistic vision of writing, illness and death. Indeed, the motif appears not only in *2666*, but much earlier as well; as Natasha Wimmer has noted, Bolaño was highly conscious of the gravity of his liver disease as far back as the early 1990s (xviii). As such, it is hardly surprising that the bulk of his published fiction is tinged with a foreboding sense of dread in the face of looming death.

Accordingly, critical response has in several cases approached Bolaño's body of work from this vantage of desperation and futility, in which the writer is hopelessly cast adrift in a society rent with political upheaval. Ignacio López-Vicuña, for example, underscores a "visión anti-humanista" in Bolaño, and suggests a strong affinity with French poets of the 19th century, such as Rimbaud and Baudelaire, for whom "la poesía no puede humanizarnos pero sí puede forzarnos a mirar el lado oscuro o demoníaco de nuestra cultura, llevándonos a reconocer nuestra hipócrita complicidad" (201). He ultimately reaches a stark conclusion, which leaves little hope for literature as a source of redemption: "Si bien para Bolaño la literatura no es una fuerza civilizadora, sí puede ser un testimonio del profundo malestar en nuestra civilización … sugiere que la escritura –y la cultura en general –está profundamente marcada por la barbarie del presente: no puede escapar de ella, no puede desmarcarse ni constituirse en un espacio privilegiado, seguro o civilizado" (201-202). Alexis Candia goes a step further, asserting that this barbaric outlook constitutes an aesthetic vision in which the Dionysian element is exalted as an artistic refuge from the corruption of capitalist society. He writes:

> Lo dionisíaco … constituye—junto al sexo, la épica y el juego—la "Magia", es decir, aquella fuerza se opone al mal para crear el "Paraíso Infernal" que constituye el centro de gravedad … Así, lo dionisíaco representa el festejo de la vida y la creación, encontrando en la embriaguez, la creación artística y en el desenfreno sexual los máximos símbolos de su paso por las novelas de Roberto Bolaño. (191)

While Candia’s focus rests primarily on questions of evil and the appearance of the Dionysian as a kind of counter-balance to these forces, his foregrounding of the Nietzschean dialectic of Apollo and Dionysus is nonetheless crucial.

Before delving into the relevance of this motif within the context of Bolaño’s work, it will be essential to outline the broad contours of the philosophy as Nietzsche conceived of it. Ellis Shookman, exploring this duality in the work of Thomas Mann, provides a useful overview:

> Named for the gods Apollo and Dionysus, the two tendencies assume contrasting artistic and physiological forms … Apollo stands for mere appearances … for moderate restraint, and for the principle of individuation. This last term comes from Arthur Schopenhauer … and it connotes awareness of oneself as a particular person. Dionysus, by contrast, stands for reality, blissful ecstasy and self-forgetfulness, that is, for reunion with other people and reconciliation with nature. Apollo represents beauty and illusions, in other words, while Dionysus reveals suffering and knowledge. (88)

Nevertheless, the concept remains highly mutable, and has been re-interpreted through numerous artistic channels to signal the creative tension between rational control and the chaotic unconscious. Michael Drolet notes that Nietzsche’s vision of Apollo and Dionysus springs from his interpretation of Greek tragedy, in which a balance between the two elements is essential. He describes, moreover, the basis of Nietzsche’s questioning of the overriding Platonic emphasis on order and formal perfection:

> Platonic philosophy became complicit with the Apollonian … Plato’s philosophy justified the illusion that form and beauty were the true reality. This, according to Nietzsche, was part of a strategy of human self-empowerment. It was a way of turning the blind and capricious elements of nature into something comprehensible and therefore

> less terrifying, a way of making the world manageable, as well as technically manipulable by humans. (16)

However, Lillian Feder points out that Nietzsche was in fact not the first writer to invoke the motif, noting that his vision of Dionysus in many ways conjures "earlier German Romantic interpretations of the god as a symbol of emotional and sexual release, of poetic inspiration, and political revolution" (205). Drawing on depictions of Dionysus in Euripides' *Bacchae*, Feder explains: "The story of Dionysiac power, fertility, pleasure, and madness conveys the efforts of human beings to regulate their own feelings and conduct; indeed, it delineates the mental and emotional tracks of that precarious inner route" (39). She proceeds to note Dionysus's portrayal not only in terms of his being a *victim* of madness, struck by Hera and sent to wander through Egypt and Syria, but also his ability to inflict madness upon others (39).

While the Dionysian does indeed figure prominently throughout Bolaño's oeuvre, I will argue that it does not, as Candia suggests, indicate a glorification of excess. Rather, it assumes various guises, all linked to a certain malignancy that is on one hand inevitable, though at the same time threatening to the notion of order and equilibrium that must reign in the literary work and in society at large. It is tied, moreover, to the subtext of contagious madness to which Feder alludes above, which re-emerges frequently as a reminder of the fluidity of boundaries between literature and the outside world in Bolaño's work. At one point in the second book of *2666*, Óscar Amalfitano, one of the many victims of a Quixotic, literature-induced madness throughout the novel, muses: "La locura es contagiosa, en efecto, y los amigos, sobre todo cuando uno está solo, son providenciales" (229). His comment, as I will discuss in my chapter on *2666*, hints at the idea that barbaric literature, devoid of a moral stance, represents a toxic, potentially destructive force, capable of infecting society as a whole. As such, it will be essential to explore in greater depth these suggestions of madness that appear as a by-product of Dionysian abandon. It is also important to note that Bolaño himself made numerous references to the Apollo-Dionysus dialectic in some of his nonfiction works. In the aforementioned essay, "Literatura + enfermedad = enfermedad," for example, he projects a sense of resignation that the desire-driven Dionysian impulse has infected virtually all institutional pillars of society: "Dioniso lo ha invadido todo. Está instalado en las iglesias y en los ONG, en el gobierno y en las casas reales, en las oficinas y en los barrios de chabolas. La culpa de todo la tiene Dioniso. El vencedor es Dioniso … ¿Y dónde diablos está el maricón de Apolo? Apolo está enfermo, grave" (142-143). This sense of a loss of order is a preoccupation that resurfaces throughout Bolaño's entire body of work, and resonates at the frequency of the political, the social and, of course, the literary.

My intention, however, is not to reduce Bolaño's aesthetic to an oversimplified binary of artistic enlightenment in conflict with barbaric irrationality. Rather, I intend to argue that these allusions to the Apollo-Dionysus dialectic, both implicit and explicit, invite a consideration of how this framework may shed light on literature's interplay with political and social reality in his works. Along these lines, this study will also offer a counterpoint to López-Vicuña's contention that Bolaño's cosmovision is fundamentally anti-humanist. I will suggest that Bolaño's conception of literary endeavor entails not merely bearing witness to horror as a reflective lens revealing one's own hypocrisy, but moreover points the reader in the direction of inner questioning as a step in the process of self-transformation. One of the central tenets of Bolaño's approach to the spectrum of civilization and barbarism is the notion that literature must reckon with the barbaric side of human nature, which Lopez-Vicuña associates with universal, psychologically-ingrained fascist tendencies, and must also invite the reader to establish a dialogue with the text. This vision suggests a transcendence of oppositional political ideologies through identification with the other; the process applies to the struggles of his often alienated, socially-marginalized protagonists—cast, significantly, in the rational mold of detective figures—to find meaning in their lives, but it also applies to the literary dynamic itself, which Bolaño envisions as an edifying, give-and-take experience between reader and text, in which both entities emerge transformed. The moral underpinnings of this relationship are of a piece with Wolfgang Iser's reader-response theories of the text, in which he speaks of the "dialectical structure of reading," arguing:

> The need to decipher gives us the chance to formulate our own deciphering capacity—i.e., we bring to the fore an element of our being of which we are not directly conscious … The production of the meaning of literary texts … does not merely entail the discovery of the unformulated, which can then be taken over by the active imagination of the reader; it also entails the possibility that we may formulate ourselves and so discover what had previously seemed to elude our consciousness. (68)

Thus there is an essential element of subjectivity involved in the acts of reading and writing, which are clearly of paramount importance in Bolaño's work and, at times, amount to precisely the same process. There are moments when he associates this righteous endeavor with the Apollonian, closely linked to the recurring notion that the act of artistic creation in and of itself represents an attempt at imposing order on the chaos of life. And indeed, we find that the structure of his prose reveals a high level of precision and attention to form, even as the story within is shot through with discord and fragmentation. In a 2001 interview Bolaño touches on this aesthetic paradox, drawing a contrast between story, which pertains "to the realm of chance, that is, chaos, disorder, or to a realm that's in constant turmoil (some call it apocalyptic)," and form, which he describes as “a choice made through cunning, intelligence and silence, all the weapons used by Ulysses in his battle against death” (Boullosa 53).

And while Bolaño’s prose dominated his late literary career, he frequently invoked poetry as the most sacred form of expression, a space of refuge uncorrupted by exterior forces. Bound up in his transcendent view of poetry is a broader notion that literature is perpetually at risk of being co-opted and degraded by political and commercial interests. His often polemic commentary on the ideologically fraught intersection of literature and politics evokes an uneasy sense that the two are inextricably bound in an essentially counterproductive relationship of complicity. One selection in particular, an essay entitled “Una proposición modesta,” finds Bolaño grappling with this phenomenon in the context of a bitterly-divided political landscape in Chile:

> yo preferiría que entráramos en el siglo XXI … de forma más civilizada, tal vez discutiendo, que también quiere decir *escuchando* y *reflexionando*, pero si eso no fuera posible, como todo parece indicar, no estaría mal, al menos no sería un mal menor, entrar en el tercer milenio pidiendo perdón a diestra y siniestra, y ya que estamos, de paso, hacerle una estatua a Nicanor Parra en la Plaza Italia, una a Nicanor y otra a Neruda, pero de espaldas.
>
> Llegado a este punto, lo presiento, más de un presunto lector se dirá a sí mismo … Bolaño dice que Parra es el poeta de la derecha y Neruda el de la izquierda.
>
> Algunos no saben leer. (85)

This selection throws into stark relief two central elements of Bolaño’s vision of the interplay between the literary and the political. The first, clearly, entails profound disillusionment with what he perceives as a sterile political discourse marked by rancor and an aversion to dialogue and reconciliation. On the literary plane, this frustration frequently manifests as a strong questioning of nationalist tendencies in literature; the playful suggestion of Parra and Neruda statues with their backs to each other represents an ironic antithesis to the basic notion that poets must concern themselves with the pursuit of universal truths, rather than assuming an ideological posture of negation that precludes any semblance of dialogue. At other moments Bolaño probes this tension in the form of idealistic commentaries on a utopic, transcontinental literature blazing new paths into the unknown, replete with irreverent disavowals of the Boom writers, whom he viewed as politically compromised. Using the work of Peruvian writer Jaime Bayly as an example, he describes:

> una narrativa en donde por primera vez caminan en cierto modo juntas las novelas que se producen a este y al otro lado del Atlántico. A diferencia del grupo del boom, integrado únicamente por latinoamericanos, en el conglomerado aún vacilante de la narrativa del fin del milenio caben españoles y latinoamericanos y el influjo va en ambas direcciones, como lo demuestra, por ejemplo, la literatura de Enrique Vila-Matas, César Aira y Javier Marías, catalán, argentino y madrileño, probablemente los tres autores más adelantados en la frontera del nuevo territorio a explorar. ¿Cuál es ese nuevo territorio? El mismo de siempre, pero otro, que es una forma de decir que no lo sé. En cualquier caso es el territorio en donde están los huesos de Cervantes y de Valle-Inclán y es el territorio no hollado, el territorio de los muertos y el territorio de la aventura. (“Notas” 306)

This excerpt, while veiled in a characteristic indeterminacy, offers a close approximation of how Bolaño conceived of “end-of-millennium” fiction in the Spanish language—universal in outlook, unconstrained by questions of national identity, and generally representative of open dialogue across a broad range of traditions. It is a definition that undoubtedly leaves many gaps, but nonetheless provides a useful starting point in approaching Bolaño's perception of Spanish-language literature's place at the turn of the century. On the surface, it would seem that Bolaño's comments here harken back to Borges, about whose notion of modernity Patrick Dove writes: "In his rejection of nationalism and all other forms of popular struggle, Borges conceives of modernity as the tendential depoliticization of literature" (56). Such is the critical foundation of Bolaño's "El gaucho insufrible,"—a parody of Borges' story "El sur"—which, while far from "depoliticized," projects a shared distrust of political interference in the literary sphere. Beyond Bolaño's outright rejection of nationalist tendencies, though, lies a crucial sense in which writing constitutes a courageous act of confronting and attempting to banish one's fears and past traumas, both personal and political. His reference to "adventure," too, is a recurring motif, and signals an openness to risks and a willingness to experiment with new forms of expression. It is from this aesthetic vantage that one must consider Bolaño's depiction of literature as a life-and-death struggle; at stake in the literary melees that erupt in his fiction, often in playfully defiant terms, is the survival of literature as an unsullied space of resistance to repressive social, political and economic structures.

For Bolaño, at the epicenter of institutional repression is the inescapable reality of neoliberal capitalism, which surfaces throughout his work as an insidious confluence of desire, exploitation, and violence. Taking NAFTA as one specific manifestation of this ideological paradigm, Sharae Deckard, in an article on "millennial capitalism" in *2666*, describes a widespread pattern of "privatization, deregulation, and land appropriation to remove the barriers to multinational capital" (3). She proceeds to note: "The social impact of neoliberalization and structural adjustment in Mexico has been drastic: heightening labor migration, deepening socio-economic inequities, intensifying the poverty of indigenous populations, and sparking an explosion of social violence around the nexus of foreign-owned industry and black market economies in drugs, arms and smuggling" (3). In many respects, it is precisely the social and psychological fallout from this neoliberal framework that Bolaño seeks to unravel in his work. Indeed, the displaced, vagrant protagonists that drift through his fictional landscapes are firmly situated in the context of a society stripped of values, with an increasingly degraded sense of community, attempting to fill that void with literary values.

As such, several critics have drawn attention to the ways in which Bolaño's work engages with the notion of literature as a vehicle of political resistance. Andreea Marinescu, for example, argues that his novella *Amuleto* constitutes both an incorporation and a critique of the *testimonio* genre in Latin American narrative, which Donald Shaw describes in broad terms as writing that "springs from first-hand experience and normally takes the form of eye-witness accounts of events involving real people and the actual participation in them of an individual who represents people caught up in a significant historical situation." He further adds: "it is designed to uncover censored realities, to strengthen the will to resist, to formulate accusations against institutionalized violence and injustice, and to raise the reader's threshold of awareness. The hope is that it represents a form of empowerment of the witness/victim and is intended to contribute to bringing about change" (*A Companion* 167). In Marinescu's view, Bolaño reworks *testimonio* in such a way that on one hand rejects its foundation of identity politics, while at the same time channeling its progressive focus into a more "intersubjective" framework of cooperation ("Testimonio" 145).

We detect, then, what might be considered a humanistic bent in Bolaño's writing. Embedded within the political dynamic to which Marinescu alludes above is an approach to writing that places confidence in literature's ability to shape individual consciousness, which in turn may act as an agent of empowerment and potentially a catalyst for broader social and political change. This reorientation of the political is, indeed, a facet of Bolaño's work that writers of his own generation have noted when considering the extent to which his writing is politically engaged. Jorge Volpi, for example, considers him "the most political writer of recent Latin American generations," and notes: "One could call his approach almost post-political because it isn't ideologically committed to any one thing, but is still radically political" (Maristain 237). Rodrigo Fresán echoes this sentiment, characterizing his aesthetic as "political, but in a way that is more personal than militant or demagogic, closer to the mystique of the beatniks" (Rohter). Jean Franco, on the other hand, interprets this same side-stepping of identity politics as an indication of a certain futility bordering on irresponsibility, arguing: "It is not so much that literature can do anything, but rather that, in Bolaño's canon, there is not much left for it to do" ("Questions" 208). She ultimately asserts: "Destitute of belief after the disasters of the twentieth century, Bolaño's characters have little left to amuse themselves besides occasional friendship and trivial pursuits including literature. Survivors of a great disaster, they are left chasing an elusive real" (208).

These conflicting interpretations point to a fundamental ambivalence that invariably attends any consideration of the intersection between literature and politics in Bolaño's work. Franco's contention is, indeed, partially borne out by a persistent sense that despite any glimmers of optimism regarding literature's potential to uplift and enlighten, the very notion of literary endeavor entails walking a precarious tightrope between communal engagement with concrete social reality, and solitary, self-absorbed vanity. This tension resurfaces repeatedly throughout the works included in this study, and hints at Bolaño's own conflicted stance on literary creation, in which the presence of writerly ego is often bound to notions of social and political disconnect, and represents a highly destabilizing force. I will argue, however, that this persistent uncertainty regarding the supposed virtues of the poetic vocation should not necessarily be conflated with escapism, as Franco seems to suggest. Rather, it may more appropriately be viewed as a process of self-questioning, which leads the writer-protagonist—and ultimately the reader—down a path, often frustrated, in the direction of understanding.

Fiction in Bolaño's work, therefore, serves a vital social function that is distinct from simply pleasure or the notion of a literary community. While Franco rightly observes the marginalization of Bolaño's protagonists, as well as his avoidance of overt ideological entanglement, we need not necessarily take these to imply that literature has been entirely disconnected from the political realm, futile to effect material change. We will see that for Bolaño, at his most optimistic, literature represents a stronghold standing in defiance of growing waves of alienation, individualism and indifference. And while his own comments regarding literature and culture are notoriously incendiary and sometimes contradictory, it is useful here to return to the aforementioned interview conducted by Carmen Boullosa, in which he attempts to distill his vision of the political within an aesthetic context:

> All literature, in a certain sense, is political. I mean, first, it's a reflection on politics, and second, it's also a political program. The former alludes to reality—to the nightmare or benevolent dream that we call reality—which ends, in both cases, with death and the obliteration not only of literature, but of time. The latter refers to the small bits and pieces that survive, that persist; and to reason. Although we know, of course, that in the human scale of things, persistence is an illusion and reason is only a fragile railing that keeps us from plunging into the abyss. (Boullosa 52)

His casting of literature in Apollonian terms is, as we will see, far from casual. Indeed, this invocation of reason as a safeguard against pending collapse underpins much of his fiction. Bolaño's reference to a "political program," then, alludes to the notion that literature must function as an agent of redemption or transformation, and as a kind of counterbalance to the apocalyptic sense of dread that suffuses his vision of reality.

In the chapters that follow, I will explore the ways in which Bolaño draws on this dialectic between Apollonian reason and Dionysian instinct, conjuring literature as a space of mediation between the individual in his or her quest for order and meaningful human engagement, and a hostile external reality marked by incomprehensibility and degraded values. Along these lines, Fernando Saucedo Lastra compellingly suggests that the Apollo and Dionysus dialectic may be seen as informing Bolaño's notion of narrative structure in *Los detectives salvajes*: "La trama … da voz al azar y al caos, mientras que la forma que la contiene es una estructura inapelable, astuta y clara que ordena o, mejor, conduce el caos dentro de límites precisos" (85). Throughout this study I will expand on this observation, and show how the dialectic may be used to shed light not only on Bolaño's structure of controlled chaos, but also on his overarching aesthetic of balance, in which the literary work stands a source of edification, broadly representative of dialogue, openness and positive transformation, in perpetual conflict with the forces of infinite desire, apathy and narcissistic self-involvement. While there is a lingering preoccupation in Bolaño's work concerning the threat of ideological contamination and corruption by larger forces that literature confronts, it nonetheless occupies a redemptive space, in which both reader and writer grapple with the darkest elements of the human condition and attempt to extract knowledge and understanding, using the experience to bring about personal and social change.

In the first chapter of this study I will explore this dialectic as it surfaces in two of Bolaño's short stories, "El gaucho insufrible" and "El viaje de Álvaro Rousselot." In each of these selections, Bolaño summons the landscape of contemporary Argentine fiction as a point of departure for a broader questioning of the long-standing binary between "civilized," as opposed to "barbaric," literature, which is gradually dismantled through the displaced protagonists' quests to transcend the narrow confines of nationalist literary tradition. The second chapter will pick up this thread of "barbaric" literature in the context of authoritarian violence as it appears in the novels *Nocturno de Chile* and *Monsieur Pain*. In both works, the first-person accounts of the writer-protagonists present us with a vision of the Apollonian that devolves from enlightened creation into a solitary retreat from social reality, as their respective aesthetics are co-opted by oppositional political forces and delegitimized as viable paths of resistance. The third chapter will delve deeper into this question of humanistic engagement through the lens of laughter, which surfaces repeatedly throughout the novels *Amuleto* and *El Tercer Reich*. In these works laughter assumes a number of forms, from the Nietzschean laughter of individual transcendence to Bakhtin's celebratory vision of laughter as a source of collective resistance and renewal. I will seek, moreover, to uncover the deeper implications of narrative and emotional distance that are contained within Bolaño's invocations of laughter, as these illustrate how protagonists seek alternatively to maintain, and attempt to permeate, rigid categories of identity and belonging. In the final chapter of this study we will find a convergence of these disparate manifestations of Apollo and Dionysus in *2666*. This chapter will focus primarily on the destabilizing presence of erotic desire and Sadean transgression, which expand to encompass not only economic, political and social reality, but also broader notions of writerly ethics and the role of literature in modern society.

Given Bolaño’s well-established vision of literature as engaged in critical dialogue across a vast landscape of literary, theoretical and philosophical traditions, this study will necessarily draw from a variety of interpretive frameworks in order to approach his body of work adequately. It should be reiterated, then, that the Apollo-Dionysus dialectic is not a static construct, limited to Nietzsche’s conception of Greek tragedy; rather, it is a framework in constant flux, and acquires moral, political and aesthetic dimensions throughout Bolaño’s work. As we will see, it not only comes to represent an omnipresent, unresolved psychic tension within the protagonist between abandon and restraint, and between solitary reflection and active engagement; ultimately it also hints at the possible shapes modern literature may assume, and provides a conceptual framework with which to understand how it may interface constructively with an often bleak reality.

Chapter 1:

Dreaming of Proust: Modernization and The Search for Civilization in "El gaucho insufrible" and "El viaje de Álvaro Rousselot"

In a lecture given by Roberto Bolaño, entitled "Derivas de la pesada" *(Entre paréntesis* 2004), the late author expounds, in critical and often incendiary language, on the state of Argentine literature post-Borges, which he traces along three distinct lineages—that of Roberto Arlt, Osvaldo Soriano, and Osvaldo Lamborghini. Of these three he argues: "son reacciones antiborgeanas … en el fondo, representan un retroceso, son conservadores y no revolucionarios, aunque los tres, o al menos dos de ellos, se postulan como alternativas de un pensamiento de izquierda" (25). The overarching premise of his talk concerns a decisive shift that takes place following the death of Borges, whom Bolaño clearly admired and often described in transcendent terms. Here he writes:

> Es como si muriera Merlín, aunque los cenáculos literarios de Buenos Aires no eran ciertamente Camelot. Se acaba, sobre todo, el reino del equilibrio. La inteligencia apolínea deja su lugar a la desesperación dionisiaca. El sueño, un sueño muchas veces hipócrita, falso, acomodaticio, cobarde, se convierte en pesadilla, una pesadilla muchas veces honesta, leal, valiente, que actúa sin red de protección, pero pesadilla al fin y al cabo, y, lo que es peor, literariamente pesadillesca, literariamente suicida, literariamente callejón sin salida. (24)

The shift from Apollonian intelligence toward Dionysian chaos, as I will argue in the current study, is an undercurrent that runs through Bolaño's entire body of work. This chapter in particular will focus on two pieces of short fiction, "El gaucho insufrible" and "El viaje de Álvaro Rousselot" (*El gaucho insufrible* 2003), both of which may be read as incisive critiques of Argentine narrative in the 20th century, very much in line with the dire foreboding that punctuates "Derivas de la pesada."

My primary purpose will be to show how Bolaño circumscribes this literary criticism with the Apollo-Dionysus dialectic as a means of reinforcing his own vision of modern literature, in which Dionysian excess must be mediated by Apollonian rationality. As we will see, this notion of excess is tied closely to the stagnation of nationalist ideology and the prevalence of corporal violence and brutality as a literary mode. At the same time, Bolaño resuscitates the 19th-century debate surrounding civilization and barbarism, which he frames within the context of a clash between individuality and the purity of creative vision, on one hand, and the degradation of art through mass commercialism on the other. Ultimately, we find that these concerns transcend the relatively narrow sphere of 20th-century Argentine literature, and raise more far-reaching questions about the viability of literary tradition in the face of modernization. I will argue, moreover, that the quests of the protagonists in "El gaucho insufrible" and "El viaje de Álvaro Rousselot" are broadly representative of the drive of the individual to restore order in a destabilized society, permeated by commodification and consumerist excess. In each story the metafictional subtext, as elsewhere in Bolano's work, points to literature as a humanizing endeavor, a potential means of guiding both the reader and writer in the direction of understanding and transformation.

I. "El gaucho insufrible": Literary Context

It will be useful to note from the outset that "El gaucho insufrible" is essentially a parody of the Borges story "El sur," which is undoubtedly a parodic text in its own right. In keeping with Linda Hutcheon's view that parody "both incorporates and challenges" the source text (11), Bolaño's re-writing of Borges goes beyond merely paying tribute to the father of contemporary

Argentine letters and ventures into the territory of critical re-configuration. In the Borges short story, Juan Dahlmann becomes ill shortly after reading *One Thousand and One Nights* and accidentally bumping his head, and it is subsequently recommended that he leave for the countryside south of Buenos Aires in order to convalesce. His train ride to the pampa, in effect, transports him into the past and transforms him into an unwitting gaucho.

The story, rife with suggestions of literature-induced insanity, seems to provide Bolaño an ideal template with which to revive crucial questions concerning the relationship between literature and tradition, and, moreover, the role literature assumes in daily life. Throughout "El sur" Borges plays heavily with conceptions of time, drawing contrasts between the modern bustle of Dahlmann's life in Buenos Aires and the rustic past of life on the pampa, represented in the story through references to the *gauchesque*. The role of literature in the story, then, is escapist, and seems to alternate between pleasure and frivolous distraction. At one point during Dahlmann's train ride to the pampa, the narrator notes: "Dahlmann cerraba el libro y se dejaba simplemente vivir" (*Obras completas* 527); and later, "su directo conocimiento de la campaña era harto inferior a su conocimiento nostálgico y literario" (527). Borges simultaneously exalts the universal nature of literature as an escape to unknown worlds, while also subtly questioning the way in which reading supplants the actual living of one's life, leaving the reader with an interpretive framework based on imaginary constructs. For Ricardo Piglia, this tension is evidence of a paradoxical anti-intellectual tendency that surfaces in Borges' work. He argues: "la lectura, los libros, la biblioteca lleva siempre en los relatos de Borges a la enfermedad y a la muerte … prevalece la idea de que la biblioteca, los libros, empobrecen y que las vidas elementales de los hombres simples son la verdad" ("Sobre Borges"). Viewed in this context, Dahlmann's departure from the rational world into the realm of fantasy may be interpreted as tracing a continuum between Apollonian reason and Dionysian abandon.

At the same time, of course, Borges is grappling with the same questions concerning modernity, nationalism and literary tradition that would occupy Bolaño decades later. In this context, the representation of the *gauchesque* in "El sur" merits close attention. We are presented initially with a nostalgic vision of the gaucho: "Un estuche con el daguerrotipo de un hombre inexpresivo y barbado, una vieja espada, la dicha y el coraje de ciertas músicas, el hábito de estrofas de *Martín Fierro*, los años, el desengaño, y la soledad" (525). In the final bar scene, Dahlmann experiences pangs of literary nostalgia, as he sees an old gaucho balled up on the floor, "como fuera del tiempo, en una eternidad" (528), and is invigorated by the freedom embodied in that image. In contrast to the welter of the modern city, propelled by the relentless flow of time, the pampa becomes a place of refuge.

Yet, as with all forms of parody, this reference to the *gauchesque* tradition is a mixture of both homage and criticism. As Borges explains in "El escritor argentino y la tradición": "Creo que el *Martín Fierro* es la obra más perdurable que hemos escrito los argentinos; y creo con la misma intensidad que no podemos suponer que es … nuestra Biblia, nuestro libro canónico" (267). In the same essay, he goes on to argue: "los nacionalistas simulan venerar las capacidades de la mente argentina pero quieren limitar el ejercicio poético de esa mente a algunos pobres temas locales, como si los argentinos sólo pudiéramos hablar de orillas y estancias y no del universo" (271). Borges underscores a particularly important point concerning literary tradition, and one that Bolaño has evidently picked up on as well—namely, the fact that being an Argentine writer does not entail a need to indulge in the nationalistic exaltation of regional themes. Nevertheless, while Bolaño acknowledges that *Martín Fierro* "es una novela de la libertad" ("Derivas" 23), he strongly questions the hallowed status Borges bestowed upon Hernández's epic poem:

> Es curioso que Borges escribiera tanto y tan bien del *Martín Fierro*. No sólo el Borges joven, que en ocasiones suele ser, en el ámbito puramente verbal, nacionalista, sino también el Borges adulto … Con Hernández o con el *Martín Fierro,* Borges da la impresión de estar actuando, de estar actuando a la perfección, por otra parte, pero en una obra de teatro que le parece desde el principio, más que detestable, equivocada. Pero, detestable o equivocada, también le parece irremediable. (23-24)

The sense of inevitability that Bolaño ascribes to Borges here sheds considerable light on the significance of Juan Dahlmann's final crossing of the threshold into the pampa. This is, Bolaño seems to say, the unfortunate destiny of the Argentine writer—to return against all reason to the savage tradition of the gaucho. It is precisely from this vantage that "El gaucho insufrible" works to undermine Borges's vision of *Martín Fierro* and Argentine identity and, ultimately, challenge the primacy of canonical icons.

Framed differently, Bolaño's parody is firmly in line with what Harold Bloom termed "the anxiety of influence." In his landmark book he speaks of "strong poets, major figures with the persistence to wrestle with their precursors, even to the death," and further argues, "Weaker talents idealize; figures of capable imagination appropriate for themselves" (5). For readers of Bolaño, this is certainly familiar terrain—the idea of the writer engaged in a fight to the death, appropriating the weapons of predecessors in order to challenge their authority—and there are hints of this throughout "El gaucho insufrible." It would seem that for Bolaño, a Chilean writer who spent much of his life in Mexico and Spain, the mere fact of having written a story ostensibly about the dismal landscape of Argentine literature is perhaps evidence enough that he shares Borges's cosmopolitan notions of literary tradition and appropriation. Bolaño's reflections on the nature of literary exile, some of which appear in a talk entitled "Literatura y exilio," lend strong support to this artistic credo. He makes reference, in particular, to a poem by Nicanor Parra, which reads:

> Los cuatro grandes poetas de Chile
> son tres:
> Alonso de Ercilla y Rubén Darío. (*Entre paréntesis* 44)

Condensing the meaning of the poem, Bolaño offers an ironic reminder: "No tenemos ni a Darío ni a Ercilla, que no podemos apropiarnos de ellos, sólo leerlos, que ya es bastante. La segunda enseñanza … es que el nacionalismo es nefasto y cae por su propio peso" (46). Rodrigo Fresán, contemporary and friend of Bolaño, echoes this sentiment, musing, "la verdadera y única patria de un escritor es su biblioteca" (*Palabra de América* 68). The notion of the writer as fundamentally exiled by nature, disconnected from national political interest, is undoubtedly at the thematic crux of "El gaucho insufrible," and, as we will see, Bolaño fuses this idea with the dissolution of established order in Argentina—framed by the economic and social ravages of neoliberal policy—to suggest that the writer's role entails a search for balance in a world enveloped in chaos and uncertainty.

II. Gauchos, Politics, and Aesthetic Decline in the Era of Late Capitalism

In the opening pages of "El gaucho insufrible" we are presented with an image of the protagonist, Héctor Pereda, that is undeniably Apollonian: "fue un cuidadoso y tierno padre de familia y un abogado intachable, de probada honradez, en un país y en una época en que la honradez no estaba, precisamente, de moda" (15). Mirroring Juan Dahlmann's flight from reality in "El sur," Pereda subsequently experiences a profound shift in consciousness: "decepcionado con la judicatura, abandonó la vida pública y se dedicó, al menos durante un tiempo, a la lectura y a los viajes" (16). The backdrop of Pereda's journey is a vision of Buenos Aires in precipitous decline, and it is surely not coincidental that the story takes place around the time of the 2000 economic collapse in Argentina. Indeed, it is this downturn that triggers Pereda's retreat from Buenos Aires and into the pampa, which coincides with his psychological transformation, described by the narrator in irrational, hysterical terms:

> cuando hablaba de política nacional e internacional el cuerpo del abogado se tensaba como si estuviera aplicando una descarga eléctrica … comió con un juez jubilado y con un periodista jubilado y durante toda la comida no paró de reírse. Al final, mientras tomaban cada uno una copa de coñac, el juez le preguntó qué le hacía tanta gracia. Buenos Aires se hunde, respondió Pereda. El viejo periodista pensó que el abogado se había vuelto loco y le recomendó la playa, el mar, ese aire tonificante … Pocos días después, sin embargo, la economía argentina cayó al abismo. (19-20)

There is an implicit contrast at work here that plays on traditional representations of the city, as refined political center, in conflict with the savagery of the countryside, a marginal territory where lawlessness reigns. Occupying a politically-fraught middle ground between the two is the figure of the gaucho, immortalized in *Martín Fierro*, whom Argentine nationalists came to consider "the "anti-*Facundo*" … who defends Argentine identity against *europeizante* usurpers" (Shumway 290-91). Josefina Ludmer, in an interview with the Argentine newspaper Clarín, elaborates on the partisan roots of *Martín Fierro* as political allegory:

> El *Martín Fierro* está publicado en una intervención muy particular, muy específica … sale contra la Ley de Vagos y Malentretenidos, por la que agarraban a los gauchos … y los llevaban al Ejército. Entonces, los estancieros perdían mano de obra. Es una lucha

> entre soldado o peón … El Ejército necesita sus cuerpos para defender la frontera de los indios. (Kolesnicov)

Historian Michael Goebel also underscores the reality that the gaucho image "could be drawn upon by politically diverse groups to legitimise their goals through references to a supposed 'cultural essence' of the nation" (41).

Borges, as Nicolas Shumway reminds us, "sought to depoliticize the *gauchesque* for which Argentine nationalists were making extravagant claims" (71), and furthermore cautioned against conflating the *gauchesque* with what has been termed *poesía popular*. The former, it has been noted, was written by educated poets with well-defined political inclinations, who created a gaucho that was romanticized and subsequently held up as a symbol of Argentine identity. The latter, on the other hand, refers to what might be more appropriately considered folk compositions, performed by *payadores* from the countryside. In Borges's view:

> Los poetas populares del campo y del suburbia versifican temas generales: las penas del amor y de la ausencia, el dolor del amor, y lo hacen en un léxico muy general también; en cambio, los poetas gauchescos cultivan un lenguaje deliberadamente popular, que los poetas populares no ensayan … en los poetas gauchescos hay una busca de las palabras nativas, una profusión de color local. ("El escritor argentino" 268)

While Borges is careful not to denigrate the literary value of the *gauchesque*, he nonetheless arrives at the conclusion that it is "un género literario tan artificial como cualquier otro" (268), and observes, furthermore, the ironic likelihood that *gauchesque* poetry, despite its mimicry of the popular genre, has ultimately influenced and transformed that same genre (269), creating a cross-pollination of bourgeois and popular literature.

It is precisely this give-and-take that Bolaño ironizes in "El gaucho insufrible," calling into question the validity of tradition in a modernized society, such that the distinction between the two is blurred. We might view this phenomenon through the lens of what Marxist economist Ernest Mandel termed 'late capitalism,' a period of "*generalized universal industrialization*" in which commodification extends into all areas of society (387). Indeed, much of the comic thrust of "El gaucho insufrible" relies on the bourgeois interpretation of the *gauchesque* that Pereda imposes on the pampa, a parodic analogue of Dahlmann's confusion of literature and reality. From the rabbits that have replaced horses and cattle, to the late-night games of Monopoly played in the *pulpería*—highly suggestive of capitalist infiltration—it becomes evident that the idealized pampa into which Pereda escapes is shot through with artificiality, and no longer exists as such. He is continually dismayed to find that the economic and political nightmare that had initially provoked his flight from the city has crept into the hitherto uncorrupted countryside. During a fireside chat with his gaucho compatriots, the mention of Peronist sympathies sparks outrage in Pereda:

> Una noche, harto de oír a aquellos viejos soltar frases deshilachadas sobre hospitales psiquiátricos y barrios miserables donde los padres dejaban sin leche a sus hijos por seguir a su equipo en desplazamientos legendarios, les preguntó qué opinión tenían sobre la política, pero, tras animarlos, al final resultó que todos ellos, de una forma o de otra, añoraban al general Perón. Hasta aquí podemos llegar, dijo Pereda, y sacó su cuchillo. (45)

One of the central motifs in "El gaucho insufrible" speaks to this ambiguity surrounding the Perón years in Argentina and the cultural aftershocks that continue to reverberate in the present of the story. While acknowledging the populist leader's strong appeal to the working class and the poor, Goebel notes the way in which Perón cloaked the reality of urbanization with a discourse of highly evocative, nationalist images as a means of projecting identity and unity:

> In his speeches Perón showed himself fully aware that Argentina was a highly urbanized country. Rural imagery as the focal point of national identity was counterbalanced by references to the tango, Argentina's urban popular musical genre par excellence … In his effort to link urban popular culture to his political goals, Perón was helped by some of the best-known tango singers of the time … Hence, even though Peronist discourse exploited the symbolic repertoire of the Centenary Generation's *gaucho* nationalism, this never translated into pitting a rural- against an urban-based interpretation of national identity. (84)

In Pereda's violent outburst we glimpse the divisive aspect of Peronist populism, whose public face appealed directly to the downtrodden and the marginalized, uniting them under common signifiers. As such, the depiction of Perón throughout "El gaucho insufrible" cannot but evoke the triumph of nationalism in both a political and a literary sense. Equally pertinent to this discussion is the distinctly anti-intellectual aura that Perón acquired in the course of his tenure; Goebel points out that although violent repression was relatively rare, "anti-Peronist writers were still subjected to harassment and deliberate humiliation. Notoriously, the regime promoted the writer Jorge Luis Borges to the job of poultry inspector in a street market, and briefly imprisoned his colleague Silvina Ocampo … without bringing forward any charges" (72).

Ultimately, then, "El gaucho insufrible" must also be read in the context of the anti-intellectualism and homogenizing impulse of authoritarian power in conflict with the universal pluralism embraced by the literary community, and Borges in particular, whose worldview Matei Calinescu has described as a "labyrinth of possibilities, of parallel times, of alternative pasts and futures, all of which have equal claims to fictional representation" (300). It is also important to note the emphasis Borges himself placed on individualism, as plainly stated during an anti-Peronist speech:

> Las dictaduras fomentan la opresión, las dictaduras fomentan la crueldad; más abominable es el hecho de que fomentan la idiotez. Botones que balbucean imperativos, efigies de caudillos, vivas y mueras prefijados, muros exornados de nombres, ceremonias unánimes, la mera disciplina usurpando el lugar de la lucidez … Combatir esas tristes monotonías es uno de los muchos deberes del escritor. ¿Habré de recordar a los lectores de *Martín Fierro* y de *Don Segundo* [*Sombra*] que el individualismo es una vieja virtud argentina? (*Ficcionario* 224)

When Bolaño refers to the disappearance of Apollo he is in effect signaling this worrisome shift towards the collective appeal to the sentimentalism of nationalist imagery, not to mention the suppression of critical inquiry and originality on the individual level—a thread that will run throughout the other selections studied in this project and, indeed, much of Bolaño's corpus. Clearly, the creative intellectualism extolled by Borges resonates deeply with Bolaño, who envisions this as the brave individuality of Apollo in conflict with the Dionysian dissolution of the self, in essence the assimilation of the individual into the chaotic whole. The great irony in Pereda's transformation, of course, lies in his wholehearted rejection of Peronism on one hand, in seeming exaltation of personal freedom, and his simultaneous embrace of what he envisions as gaucho savagery and independence, but what in reality amounts to a tame, watered-down vestige of a once-proud literary tradition. There is a sense in which Pereda's loss of rationality is bound up in this confused passage between civilization and barbarism, driven by the flawed assumption that the pampa can provide refuge from the disorder of 'civilized' society. In one scene, upon entering a *pulpería* and finding a group of gauchos playing games, Pereda experiences profound disenchantment, prompting a temporary questioning of his behavior:

> Ciertas noches … le entraban unas ganas enormes de armar una pelea … Otras veces se quedaba dormido entre sus dos gauchos y soñaba con su mujer que llevaba de la mano a sus niños y le reprochaba el salvajismo en el que había caído. ¿Y el resto del país qué?, le contestaba el abogado. Pero eso no es una excusa, che, le reprochaba la señora Hirschman. Entonces el abogado pensaba que su mujer tenía razón y se le llenaban los ojos de lágrimas. (36)

The realization that strikes Pereda at this moment lies at the center of Bolaño's moral and aesthetic argument in "El gaucho insufrible"—the fall into savagery represents a precarious sense of oblivion, which feeds directly into self-limiting, nationalist literary clichés. Indeed, the story abounds with symbolic reminders of the dangers of insularity. At one point, for example, Pereda tries to plant an orchard with seeds purchased from a surrounding area, but finds that "la tierra parecía rechazar cualquier semilla extraña" (36), a subtle critique of parochial ambition and aversion to outside influence. Moreover, Pereda's fruitless attempts to breed the horses he deems so essential to the virile spirit of the pampa ultimately reduce him to hunting the omnipresent rabbits, a pursuit that, in his mind, "no engrandecía a la patria sino que la achicaba" (33).[1] The motif is developed extensively throughout the story, and, in a general sense, reveals a pattern of homogenization and cultural atrophy; in the absence of original ideas, the pampa has become synonymous with a handful of re-hashed local themes. In other words, the notion of Apollonian intelligence has given way to a debased catering to popular appeal.

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[1] Gustavo Faverón Patriau notes that this plague of rabbits in the pampa may be read in part as a reference to Julio Cortázar's story "Carta a una señorita en París" (381); he points out, moreover, that it has roots in a historic rabbit plague that occurred in the Argentine pampa, and that it evokes "la perturbación de la naturaleza y el colapso de la economía social" (382).

In order to better understand Bolaño's criticism of provincial literature in "El gaucho insufrible" it will be useful to look past Borges and consider the cosmopolitan influence of Charles Baudelaire, whose seminal essay "The Painter of Modern Life" codified the aesthetic of the universal artist in an era of burgeoning industrial capitalism. In it, he writes:

> I ask you to understand the word *artist* in a very restricted sense, and *man of the world* in a very broad one. By the second I mean a man of the whole world, a man who understands the world and the mysterious and lawful reasons for all its uses; by the first, a specialist, a man wedded to his palette like the serf to the soil … Apart from one or two exceptions whom I need not name, it must be admitted that the majority of artists are no more than highly skilled animals, pure artisans, village intellects, cottage brains. Their conversation, which is necessarily limited to the narrowest of circles, becomes very quickly unbearable to the *man of the world*, to the spiritual citizen of the universe. (7)

It becomes quite clear that the glorified ideal of the modern artist, as Baudelaire has sketched him here, stands as the shining alternative to the local artist that we find in "El gaucho insufrible," who attends literary workshops "donde los autores nimbados por algún premio municipal disertaban largamente sobre los destinos de la patria" (19).

It is perhaps not surprising that Bolaño would later choose to use a line from Baudelaire's "Le voyage" as the epigraph to *2666*;[2] indeed, the poem is the subject of an extensive analysis by Bolaño on the intersection of illness and literature, entitled "Literatura + enfermedad = enfermedad" (*El gaucho insufrible* 2003). The essay is of interest here because his interpretation of Baudelaire's poem takes as its point of departure the notion of the traveler in 19th-century

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[2] "¡En desiertos de tedio, un oasis de horror!"; Bolaño's own interpretation of the line is nothing short of misanthropic: "No hay diagnóstico más lúcido para expresar la enfermedad del hombre moderno. Para salir del aburrimiento, lo único que tenemos a mano … es el horror, es decir el mal … O vivimos como zombis, como esclavos alimentados con soma, o nos convertimos en esclavizadores, en seres malignos" (*El gaucho insufrible* 151).

French poetry, a motif that in many ways encapsulates Bolaño's vision of cosmopolitanism and adventure, one on hand, but also his vision of desperation and futility. In this essay he writes: "El viaje que emprenden los tripulantes del poema de Baudelaire en cierto modo se asemeja al viaje de los condenados. Voy a viajar, voy a perderme en territorios desconocidos, a ver qué encuentro, a ver qué pasa" (150). It bears mentioning, moreover, that Baudelaire's conception of the 'Painter of Modern Life' is tied closely to the notion of the tireless world traveler, the questing hero in search of meaning: "And so away he goes, hurrying, searching. But searching for what? Be very sure that this man … this solitary, gifted with an active imagination, ceaselessly journeying across the great human desert—has an aim loftier than that of a mere *flâneur* … he is looking for that quality which you must allow me to call "modernity" (12).

This is not to imply, however, that Héctor Pereda is a faithful embodiment of the Baudelairean wanderer. Walter Benjamin, in his in-depth study *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, notes: "In the *flâneur,* the joy of watching is triumphant. It can concentrate on observation; the result is the amateur detective." He furthermore cautions against confusing the *flâneur* with the slightly analogous, though distinct figure of the *badaud*: "The simple *flâneur* is always in full possession of his individuality, whereas the individuality of the *badaud* disappears … it is absorbed by the outside world … which intoxicates him to the point where he forgets himself" (69). In Benjamin's analysis of Baudelaire's iconography, this actively-searching, keen observer becomes a kind of hero, defined by his ability to weather the hostile conditions of modern city life: "The hero is the true subject of *la modernité*. In other words, it takes a heroic constitution to live modernity" (*The Writer of Modern Life* 103). Pereda appears as an incarnation of Baudelaire's questing hero, though his journey leads him, at least initially, into the past. The literary ideology he embodies is marked by a staunch disavowal of present circumstance, opting instead for a degraded form of savagery that finds its roots in the heavily-trodden terrain of nationalist tradition. His displacement from a collapsed society, then, finds him surveying a wasteland where notions of innovation and renewal are entirely absent.

III. Contemporary Argentine Narrative and the Reign of the Body

It becomes clear that Pereda, ironically wielding the rhetoric of national identity, is essentially oblivious to the gradual dissolution of tradition brought about by modernization. As Josefina Ludmer argues in *Aquí América latina*, “la ciudad latinoamericana absorbe el campo y se traza de nuevo. Se desvanece la literatura rural … y aparece una literatura urbana cargada de droga, de sexo, de miseria, y de violencia” (127-28). Pereda thus becomes a caricature of the contemporary, mainstream Argentine writer, and his instinctual reversion to gaucho savagery is aligned with the primacy of the body and the nagging persistence of local concerns—in Bolaño’s eyes a regrettable and all-too-common narrative bent. One of the principal targets of his satirical barbs is the late writer Osvaldo Soriano, whom Bolaño caustically sums up as:

> Un buen novelista menor. Con Soriano hay que tener el cerebro lleno de material fecal para pensar que a partir de allí se pueda fundar una rama literaria. No quiero decir que Soriano sea malo … es bueno, es divertido, es, básicamente, un autor de novelas policiales o vagamente policiales … Sospecho que el influjo de Soriano … radica en las ventas de sus libros, en su fácil acceso a las masas de lectores … Con Soriano los escritores argentinos se dan cuenta de que pueden, ellos también, ganar dinero. No es necesario escribir libros originales, como Cortázar o Bioy … Basta escribir como Soriano. Un poco de humor, mucha solidaridad, amistad porteña, algo de tango, boxeadores tronados y Marlowe viejo pero firme. (“Derivas” 25)

Given the often hyperbolic, incendiary nature of Bolaño's literary criticism, one must proceed with caution in attempting to parse meaning from what reads ostensibly as nothing more than an antagonistic rant against popular literature. I choose to quote him at length here because one of the overarching themes of "El gaucho insufrible" deals considerably with a perceived split between the cerebral strain of Argentine narrative that can be traced to writers like Borges and Bioy Casares, and a more visceral brand of crime literature that has diverged from the aforementioned genealogy, drawing influence from the hard-boiled detective tradition of the United States, and characterized by a "subterranean vision of society" coupled with a "willingness to reflect violence and corruption" (Simpson 29). It is worth noting that Borges, well before Bolaño, issued a similar aesthetic critique of what he sensed was a questionable direction for the detective fiction genre:

> Actualmente, el género policial ha decaído mucho en Estados Unidos. El género policial es realista, de violencia, un género de violencias sexuales también. En todo caso, ha desaparecido. Se ha olvidado el origen intelectual del relato policial … Éste se ha mantenido en Inglaterra … allí todo es intelectual, todo es tranquilo, no hay violencia, no hay mayor efusión de sangre. ("El cuento policial" 79)

For Bolaño, too, the hard-boiled detective genre, at least in the context of the contemporary Argentine novelist, represents a decline—not merely for the same reasons offered by Borges in the above quote, but for its underlying potential for commercial exploitation and relatively widespread dissemination.[3] In "El gaucho insufrible" Soriano's avatar could very well be Pereda's son Bebe, who is said to write "historias vagamente policiales y melancólicas" (41), and in one of the final scenes we find a microcosm of the Argentine literary establishment to which he belongs, painted in absurdist strokes. The scene merits close consideration, as it encapsulates Bolaño's vision of literary decline:

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[3] As Bolaño himself wryly points out, though, "hablar de masas de lectores cuando en realidad estamos hablando de veinte mil personas es sin duda una exageración" ("Derivas" 25).

> Desde la calle vio el interior del local, bien iluminado, amplio y bullicioso. El Bebe presidía, junto a un viejo (¡Un viejo como yo!, pensó Pereda), una de las mesas más animadas. En otra, más cercana a la ventana desde donde espiaba, distinguió a un grupo de escritores que más bien parecían empleados de una empresa de publicidad. Uno de ellos, con pinta de adolescente, aunque ya pasaba la cincuentena y posiblemente también los sesenta, cada cierto tiempo se untaba con polvos blancos la nariz y peroraba sobre literatura universal. De pronto, los ojos del falso adolescente y los ojos de Pereda se encontraron. Durante un instante se contemplaron mutuamente como si la presencia del otro constituyera una rajadura en la realidad circundante. (50)

Most significant here is the notion of the old being passed off as new. Aside from Bebe, represented in an ironically messianic position, we are confronted by a bombastic group of aging writers made up to look like teenagers, who more closely resemble advertising executives. This, in essence, constitutes Bolaño's most incisive jab at the excesses of the Buenos Aires literary scene; contemporary literature has been reduced to the glossy re-packaging of threadbare conceits and re-branded as novelty, the ultimate goal being commodification and mass consumption.

Bolaño, it turns out, offers fairly explicit clues about what this gathering represents in literary terms and, more specifically, about who will carry the torch into the next generation of Argentine writers. In "Derivas de la pesada" he quips:

> me temo que resultará vencedora aquella que representa con mayor fidelidad a la canalla sentimental, en palabras de Borges. La canalla sentimental, que ya no es la derecha (en

> gran medida porque la derecha se dedica a la publicidad y al disfrute de la cocaína y a planificar el hambre y los corralitos, y en materia literaria es analfabeta funcional o se conforma con recitar versos del *Martín Fierro*) sino la izquierda, y que lo que pide a sus intelectuales es soma, lo mismo, precisamente, que recibe de sus amos. Soma, soma, soma Soriano, perdóname, tuyo es el reino.[4] (30)

Clearly, the two tables at the aforementioned gathering are meant to convey Bolaño's vision of political affiliation as a corrupting force. On the Left are followers of Pereda's son, united under the banner of violence and the body, and on the Right are the well-dressed writer-advertising executives with pretensions of universalism. This preoccupation with soma is echoed by Josefina Ludmer, who bemoans the increasing popularity and relevance of a brand of fiction characterized by excessive violence, and summons Osvaldo Lamborghini as a primary exemplar of this. In *Aquí América latina* she argues, rather scathingly:

> aquí en Buenos Aires no hay literatura o cultura o mercado hoy (no hay imaginación pública) sin una transgresión sexual que ya no existe como transgresión: todo puede decirse, escribirse y exhibirse. Cuando desaparece el carácter transgresivo del sexo, "el procedimiento Osvaldo Lamborghini" (no hay realidad ni política ni sociedad ni sujetos ni escritura sin sexo violento) puede llegar a ser parte de la historia literaria. (48)

In the view of Ludmer, Lamborghini typifies a category of writer that she calls "maldito," loosely defined by "la idea de decir en voz alta verdades feas" (80), and fundamentally centered on notions of evil stemming from the violent repression of the 1970s and reaching back to the fascist overthrow of Hipólito Irigoyen in 1930 (78). Bolaño—never one to shy away from a literary fist fight—has even harsher words concerning Lamborghini, whom he deems the unwitting progenitor of an insidious “secret current” of Argentine fiction, firmly in line with the Dionysian excess he sees as infecting the literary establishment as a whole: “Hoy, que está tan de moda hablar de los nihilistas … no estaría de más visitar la obra de un verdadero nihilista. El problema con Lamborghini es que se equivocó de profesión. Mejor le hubiera ido trabajando como pistolero a sueldo, o como chapero, o como sepulturero, oficios menos complicados que el de intentar destruir la literatura” (“Derivas” 29). The common thread running through these criticisms of Osvaldo Soriano and Osvaldo Lamborghini, among others, is a general unease with fiction that falls back on historicized portrayals of corporal violence confined to decaying urban landscapes, as an alternative to a more hopeful, transcendent literature of ideas—in essence, the Apollonian utopia epitomized in the work of Borges.

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[4] Osvaldo Soriano, for his part, acknowledged the general perception sketched by Bolaño above, noting in an interview, "Yo escribo sobre lo nuestro. Mis personajes, en general, son perdedores y solitarios y, de algún modo, representan aspectos muy fuertes de este país. Pero la gente que no me quiere me pone atributos que van desde "exitoso" hasta "populista". Y le puedo asegurar que eso me irrita" (Mucci).

This conflict between body and mind—between Dionysus and Apollo—is repeatedly problematized throughout “El gaucho insufrible.” Complicating the matter considerably is the subtext of mental illness that Bolaño introduces as a way of suggesting that the fragmentation of modern urban life has led to the normalization of psychological imbalance. At one point in the story we are introduced to a psychiatrist who arrives in the pampa and engages Pereda with an account of her experiences at a sanatorium in Buenos Aires: “La gente … estaba cada día más desequilibrada, hecho comprobado que llevaba a la psiquiatra a deducir que tal vez el desequilibrio mental no fuera una enfermedad sino una forma de normalidad subyacente, una normalidad vecina a la normalidad que el común de los mortales admitía” (42). It is quite clear in this episode that Bolaño is ironically drawing on the well-documented presence of psychoanalysis as a pillar of Argentine life, in such a way that addresses the invasion of politics into the realm of the personal, and furthermore posits a certain perspectivism of sanity in modern society. Indeed, Pereda, who evidently maintains a tenuous grip on his own faculties, questions the psychiatrist's own mental health, and is "convencido de que la psiquiatra no estaba muy bien de la cabeza" (43). The role reversal here underscores a recurring motif throughout "El gaucho insufrible" and Bolaño's work in general: that irrationality and insanity, within the context of an incomprehensible social and political milieu, represent merely an inherent facet of one's psychological composition—in effect, what amounts to a blurring of the distinction between reason and sanity.

From a specifically Argentine political vantage, there is ample precedent for the psychological phenomenon to which Bolaño alludes here. Mariano Ben Plotkin, in his study on the culture of psychoanalysis in Argentina, *Freud in the Pampas*, notes the widespread confusion of Argentine society following the end of the Perón era:

> The Peronist experience was from its beginning a puzzle for the middle class, a puzzle that required an explanation and forced society in general to question Argentine social and political reality. The radically anti-Peronist middle class and particularly the intelligentsia perceived the Perón regime as a pathology in the historical development of the country … the liberal anti-Perón consensus that had emerged during the Perón regime disintegrated when the man himself was gone, since Perón was the only element that had kept it together. This situation created a need for new interpretive tools (76).

It is within this framework of disorientation that the psychiatrist's presence in "El gaucho insufrible" might be considered. Out of Argentina's economic collapse at the beginning of the 21st century there is a renewed crisis on a collective level, one that Bolaño seeks to address in the form of a broader commentary on the psychological repercussions of political failure and economic decline. To be sure, there are hints of this in the opening pages of "El gaucho insufrible," in which the image of the wicked stepmother acquires a psychopathological element: "el gran problema de Argentina, de la Argentina de aquellos años, era precisamente el problema de la madrastra. Los argentinos, decía, no tuvimos madre o nuestra madre nos abandonó en las puertas de la inclusa. Madrastras, en cambio, hemos tenido demasiadas y de todos los colores, empezando por la gran madrastra peronista" (16). Embedded in this image is an undeniable sense of alienation, the notion that Argentine society as a whole has been orphaned by a political process that is hostile to the concerns of the individual. The description of the economic crisis in the story reinforces this image of dissolution: "Se congelaron las cuentas corrientes en dólares, los que no habían sacado su capital (o sus ahorros) al extranjero, de pronto se hallaron con que no tenían nada, unos bonos, unos pagarés … vagas promesas inspiradas a medias en un olvidado tango y en la letra del himno nacional" (20). Again, there is a sense in which these nationalist clichés offer nothing more than an illusory promise of stability in a country ridden with chaos and disillusionment.

As we have seen, it is this bewilderment that initially prompts Pereda's departure toward the pampa, a place presumably safe from the political turmoil and uncertainty plaguing modern life in the city. The most revealing glimpse of Buenos Aires comes in the form of one of Pereda's dreams, in which he sees a cluster of armchairs raining down from the sky over the city and suddenly bursting into flames—a vision that might well be interpreted as the collapse of middle-class prosperity and comfort in the wake of neoliberalism.[5] The passage of the psychiatrist through the pampa, however, is a subtle reminder of the extent to which this indefinable affliction has penetrated all areas of Argentine life. She offers not the hope of alleviation, but rather the announcement of the collapse of rationality in the face of crisis, further suggesting that the condition of orphanhood described by the narrator has become normalized. Plotkin, in describing the proliferation of psychoanalysis during the 1920s and 1930s, points to a similar clinical diagnosis of psychological instability, noting, "if mild neuroses were worth treating, then the boundary between alienation and 'normality' became blurred" (19). Clearly, Pereda's assessment of the psychiatrist's mental condition reinforces this ambiguity; the Quixotic reversal of assumptions here, at its essence, serves to bolster Bolaño's vision of the self as inextricably bound to political processes, on one hand, but also inherently constrained by a perspectivism that questions the supposed sanity of modern society.

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[5] Indeed, the Argentine middle class suffered considerable setbacks following the tenure of Carlos Menem throughout the 1990s, a time marked by increasing privatization and deregulation of markets. Luigi Manzetti notes that during the period between 1990 and 1999 the income gap between the poor and the wealthy increased by about 127 percent (149).

At the same time, we have seen that Pereda's reversion to savagery and the primacy of the body—in irrational defiance of political disorder—is held up to criticism. In "El gaucho insufrible" Bolaño has sketched a universe in the political system as such fails to provide answers, a vision in large part corroborated by Josefina Ludmer in *Aquí América latina.* She reflects, in particular, on the "salto modernizador" that has transformed not just Argentina, but in effect all of Latin America. She writes: "Uno de los problemas es que no hay proyecto de nación, cuando el proyecto mismo es el que la define en tanto tal. El neoliberalismo no sólo pone en cuestión el estado latinoamericano sino también la nación" (30). Subject to the unyielding forces of the market, she contends, "el efecto es la abolición de la política" (29). It is precisely this process of unchecked globalization, in which literature and culture are increasingly degraded, that forms the backdrop of "El gaucho insufrible."

In the closing scene of "El gaucho insufrible"—a comic inversion of the ending of "El sur"—Bolaño presents us with the maximum expression of a literary movement in decline. In lieu of the proud nobility of Juan Dahlmann's crossing of the threshold into the pampa, it is the cocaine-snorting writer in business attire who steps out of the café to face Pereda, whose shocking delivery of justice entails a humiliating stab to the groin. The grotesque, farcical nature of this act is arguably an apt conclusion to a story whose focus rests heavily on underscoring and satirizing the excessively corporal bent of the writers in question. In a broader sense, though, the final crisis facing Pereda evokes the notion of a choice between Dionysian free fall and the Apollonian restoration of order: "¿Qué hago … me quedo en Buenos Aires y me convierto en un campeón de la justicia, o me vuelvo a la pampa, de la que nada sé, y procuro hacer algo de provecho, no sé, tal vez con los conejos, tal vez con la gente, esos pobres gauchos que me aceptan y me sufren?" (51). As in "El sur," the resolution is sufficiently open-ended as to invite multiple interpretations. His decision to return to the pampa, incidentally, mirrors Juan Dahlman's final destiny in "El sur"—he has chosen the unknown, though in this case the unknown is devoid of romantic allure; his decision may merely point to the inability of Argentine fiction to transcend its fixation on the body. As we have seen, "El gaucho insufrible" largely eschews the exaltation of the *gauchesque* as it appears in Borges, who had extolled its invocation of individuality; this gaucho resides in a deformed mirror universe, in which the pampa represents the metaphorical trash heap of literature, the ultimate destination of worn-out tradition.

We see, then, that Bolaño's parody of "El sur," while unequivocal in its praise of Borges as an Apollonian beacon in the Latin America literary world, is at the same time rather critical of the idea of elevating the *gauchesque* as a standard-bearer of Argentine literature. Indeed, notably absent from "El gaucho insufrible" is the presence of a real gaucho in the literary or nationalist sense of the word; the void left by Pereda's vast expectations is filled by everyday country-dwellers, whose subtle traces of urban cultivation repeatedly unsettle Pereda. We find one example of this in the description of the ranch-owner don Dulce: “hablaba como un criollo aunque a Pereda no se le pasaron por alto algunas expresiones de compadrito porteño, como si don Dulce se hubiera criado en Villa Luro y llevara relativamente poco tiempo viviendo en la pampa” (28). One of the primary implications of “El gaucho insufrible,” then, is that the division between the urban center and the countryside has been erased, and thus the notion of national identity is strongly questioned. While Borges, as we have seen, sought to rid the *gauchesque* of its negative political connotations, Bolaño goes a bit further and effectively subverts the genre as a whole, drawing attention to the fact that urbanization has rendered the motif inert. He argues instead for an aesthetic that transcends nationalist politics altogether—broadly speaking, a return to the cerebral tradition of Borges.

Nevertheless, one of Bolaño’s primary concerns here seems to be the transformation that literature has undergone as a result of these economic changes. In this regard, there is little doubt that Bolaño envisions a bleak reality; the conflict between regional and universal literature, a lasting remnant of the 19th-century question of civilization and barbarism, has devolved into a debate concerning the survival of literature within the machinery of consumer capitalism. Brutal, physical literature, in this case, has acquired considerable commercial potential, and has continued to nourish a literary scene that is content to recycle nationalist motifs. Pereda’s final choice, whether to return to the pampa or stay in the city, then, forces a questioning of this aesthetic impasse. Significantly, though, Bolaño leaves open the possibility of positive transformation; Pereda, in deciding to return to the pampa, is presented with the opportunity to enlighten his gaucho compatriots and fundamentally alter the landscape. Faverón Patriau interprets his pending return as an act of revitalization: “su resolución será abrumadora pero optimista: va a convertir la plaga en ciclo de fecundidad, va a reingresar el mundo en un orden

anterior a las malformaciones de la historia. O, en otras palabras, va a reformular, en su vida, esos relatos del porvenir … que dieron origen a su historia" (415).

Pereda's trajectory, therefore, presents us with a vision of fiction that parallels Bakhtin's conception of parody, which has at its foundation notions of deconstruction and regeneration. In language that dovetails with the agrarian imagery we have seen used to evoke literary blight and renewal throughout this story, Bakhtin writes: "Degradation here means coming down to earth, the contact with earth as an element that swallows up and gives birth at the same time … Degradation digs a bodily grave for a new birth; it has not only a destructive, negative aspect, but also a regenerating one" (*Rabelais* 21). The parodic subtext of "El gaucho insufrible" develops within this framework, asserting itself as a kind of subversive dialogue with literary tradition, which pays tribute while simultaneously questioning, re-working and forging a new aesthetic path based on Apollonian insight. We will find a similar critical thread running through "El viaje de Álvaro Rousselot," where Rousselot's journey entails a drastic Dionysian transformation and points to questions about the nature of literary appropriation and the debasement of art through commodification.

IV. "El viaje de Álvaro Rousselot": The Latin American Writer in Paris

Much like Héctor Pereda in "El gaucho insufrible," Álvaro Rousselot is configured as a wanderer in the Baudelairean sense of the word, in search of something undefinable. Broadly speaking, the story centers on the voyage undertaken by the eponymous protagonist—an Argentine writer—to Paris, where he intends to confront a filmmaker who has been plagiarizing his novels. This voyage is a familiar one from the standpoint of Latin American literature; it is, in essence, the requisite pilgrimage to Paris in search of enlightenment, a well-known rite of passage for writers seeking initiation into the hallowed establishment of high literature. As

Marcy E. Schwartz points out in her book *Writing Paris*: “Arrival in Paris implies having ascended to an intellectual and artistic haven, and to have left behind the earthly materiality of Latin America … Paris represents a corrective mold for Latin American institutions, behavior and style” (14). In the Argentinean context, she traces Parisian prestige back to Sarmiento, who conceived of the city as “the artistic and organizational model that inspires Latin American progress” (13). The premise of “El viaje de Álvaro Rousselot” is founded on this notion of Paris as a locus of literary refinement, the pole opposing *barbarie* and *regionalismo*.

As we will see, however, Bolaño—despite his frequent lampooning of the ‘local’ Latin American writer—injects a healthy dose of satire into his portrayal of Paris, in such a way that de-mythologizes its significance in terms of literary output and strongly questions its sway in the realm of Latin American fiction. As Schwartz observes, “Recent fiction casts Paris as a transnational market for literature as a commodity … the city figures as an erotic force, a sign of social prestige, and a hegemonic center for cultural production” (7-8). In this portion of the chapter I will argue that Bolaño’s representation of Paris is very much in line with the direction to which Schwartz alludes here. We find that Rousselot’s trip to Paris has no connection to aspirations of literary greatness, but rather serves to reveal a seedy underworld rife with literary malfeasance and debauchery.

In the story’s exposition we get a glimpse of a fairly mediocre writer whose oeuvre consists of novels “de donde salía, invicta, la esencia de la argentinidad” (94). Rousselot, indeed, gradually comes to embody the second-rate local writer that Bolaño so thoroughly eviscerates in “Derivas de la pesada” and “El gaucho insufrible.” The thinly-veiled irony in the description of the plot of his first novel, *Soledad*, sets the stage for the elaborate satire that unfolds throughout:

> La novela trata sobre el paso de los días en una penitenciaría perdida en la Patagonia. Como es natural, abundan las confesiones que evocan vidas pasadas, instantes de felicidad perdidos, y también abunda la violencia. A la mitad del libro nos damos cuenta de que la mayoría de los personajes están muertos. Cuando sólo faltan treinta páginas para el final, comprendemos de golpe que *todos* están muertos, menos uno, pero nunca se nos revela quién es el único personaje vivo. (89)

It is subsequently revealed that the French translation of *Soledad* is titled *Las noches de la pampa*, a detail that makes abundantly clear the provincial scope of Rousselot's novel; to the reader outside of Argentina, it is immediately confined to a regional framework. And while the story is set around the middle of the 20th century, there is little doubt that Bolaño is using Rousselot as a means of tracing the genealogy of contemporary Argentine narrative; the intriguing yet half-baked plot of *Soledad*, along with its pervasive violence, could be a satire of any number of contemporary writers that Bolaño openly criticized. Incidentally, he alludes to this notion of generational decline in another short story with a similar thematic thrust, "Sensini," which concerns a writer who "pertenecía a esa generación intermedia de escritores nacidos en los años veinte" (*Cuentos* 19). Of this generation, the narrator notes:

> De esta generación (aunque tal vez la palabra generación sea excesiva) quedaba poco, pero no por falta de brillantez o talento; seguidores de Roberto Arlt, periodistas y profesores y traductores, de alguna manera anunciaron lo que vendría a continuación, y lo anunciaron a su manera triste y escéptica que al final se los fue tragando a todos … no era ciertamente la [literatura] de Borges o Cortázar y … no tardarían en dejar atrás Manuel Puig y Osvaldo Soriano. (19)

One might conclude, indeed, that Rousselot's work bears unmistakable traces of the three strands of narrative Bolaño sees as unfolding in contemporary Argentine literature. Rousselot's second novel is likely a jab at one of these literary currents, the hard-boiled, and contains a clear-cut allusion to Borges' "La muerte y la brújula": "Por aquel entonces Rousselot ya había publicado una segunda novela, *Los archivos de la calle Perú*, de tema detectivesco, cuyo argumento giraba en torno a la aparición de tres cadáveres en tres sitios distintos de Buenos Aires, los dos primeros asesinados por el tercero, y el tercero asesinado a su vez por un desconocido" (90). Again, the seemingly gratuitous violence of the hard-boiled resurfaces in satiric form, and we are reminded of the aforementioned critique of writers who, in Bolaño's view, have emerged as disciples of Osvaldo Soriano. Here Rousselot appears as a progenitor of the later hard-boiled revival initiated by the likes of Soriano, who managed to garner considerable mainstream appeal within the genre. As Amelia Simpson reminds us, for writers such as Borges "the classics are associated with nobility, with order, and with the cultivation of the intellect, while the *serie negra* represents savagery, pornography, and disorder. The hard-boiled model is viewed as a measure of the decline of an order both literary and social" (46). In contrast to the "classic" model of detective story, which may be taken to signify works by writers such as Agatha Christie and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the *noir* novel "challenges that vision by presenting crime as a symptom of a disordered society and as part of a system that fosters criminal activity" (46). As for Bolaño, it is fairly easy to determine where his preference lies regarding the direction of detective fiction—after all, "El viaje de Álvaro Rousselot," like many of Bolaño's works, is essentially a detective story, though in a less conventional sense. Rousselot's sojourn in Paris, as we will see, instills in him certain characteristic elements of the *flâneur*, the "amateur detective" who becomes an idle observer of modern humanity in the throes of capitalist frenzy.

V. Paris Deconstructed: Reviving the 'Civilization vs. Barbarism' Debate

While there has indeed been a tendency in Latin American letters—particularly in the 19th century—to exalt Paris with a certain literary mystique, there was also, as Schwartz points out, a critical current emerging as early as the beginning of the 20th century, which sought to demystify the Paris that had so thoroughly bewitched Latin American intellectuals. Citing critical works by Ricardo Güiraldes and Sebastián Salazar Bondy, she notes: "Brutal artistic competition and social alienation begin to wear away the city's glossy veneer … Paris is transformed into a decadent and destructive agent, a change that parallels the shift from an aesthetic of pleasure and luxury toward a revelation of urban modernity's high cost" (20). In many ways "El viaje de Álvaro Rousselot" builds on this notion of Parisian disenchantment, ultimately portraying it as a dead-end street, a metaphor for mass consumerism and literary fraud.

From the standpoint of the Latin American experience in Paris, it is important to take a close look at the two Argentineans Rousselot encounters in the course of his journey. The first, Riquelme, is an acquaintance from several years prior and a writer living in Paris. Bolaño uses him in large part as a satirical portrait of the hapless Latin American writer with misguided pretensions of literary greatness. Ironically, though living in a thriving cosmopolitan center where writers presumably learn to transcend provincial tendencies, we are told: "Riquelme le contó que estaba escribiendo la gran novela argentina del siglo XX. Llevaba más de 800 páginas y esperaba terminarla en menos de tres años" (100). Such is Bolaño's criticism of the Latin American writer's glorification of Paris; Riquelme has joined the throng of novelists who leave their home country with grand aspirations, only to dwell in local themes from afar. Thus the promise of transcendence amounts to a change of scenery, marked by indulgence and excess.

Significantly, it is Riquelme who initiates Rousselot's descent into irrationality and debauchery, and there are several moments in which Rousselot is described as teetering on the edge of a precipice:

> Visitaron varios bares y centros nocturnos. En algún momento de la noche Rousselot se dio cuenta de que tanto Riquelme como él se estaban comportando como adolescentes. Al principio este descubrimiento lo abochornó, luego se entregó a él sin reservas, con la felicidad de saber que al final de la noche estaba su hotel y la palabra hotel, que en ese momento parecía encarnar milagrosamente (es decir de forma instantánea) la libertad y la precariedad. (100)

Following the appearance of the prostitute Simone—the archetypal Parisian seductress who embodies erotic desire—we gradually witness Rousselot's process of transformation. The initial description of his daily routine in Buenos Aires serves to underscore the sharp contrast between order and chaos that develops:

> Su vida era ordenada: se levantaba a las seis de la mañana y escribía o trataba de escribir hasta las ocho, momento en el cual interrumpía su trato con las musas, se duchaba y se marchaba corriendo a la oficina, adonde llegaba a las nueve menos cuarto o a las nueve menos diez. A las dos de la tarde volvía a casa, comía con su mujer y por la tarde volvía al bufete … Los sábados y domingos escribía un poco más y por las noches salía, sin la mujer, a ver a sus amigos literatos. (91)

Considered alongside subsequent passages detailing Rousselot's exploits in Paris, the effect is almost comic: "Al volver a su hotel, a las cuatro de la mañana, tenía fiebre y se puso a vomitar.

Se despertó poco antes del mediodía con la sensación de haber vivido en París muchos años" (106-7). His prior life in Buenos Aires with a wife and child is essentially banished from his memory, and the reigning distinction between the civilization of Paris and the barbarism of Latin America is subverted, as Rousselot slips into vice and oblivion. Noteworthy in this passage, also, is the compartmentalization of his literary and professional life. This notion of separation, as we will see throughout the present study, hints at a recurring sense in which an excessive emphasis on order is potentially as precarious as its inverse. Indeed, Rousselot's trip to France is undeniably destructive in many ways, though ultimately has a regenerative effect on his notion of literary pursuit, as it prompts a deeper exploration of the Dionysian side of consciousness.

His existence in Paris, again, conjures images of the *flâneur*, a role he assumes almost unwittingly. In one particular scene Rousselot is taking photos along the Seine, "un poco al azar," (105) and comes across a vagrant asking for money. Curiously, Rousselot agrees to give him some, though only under the condition that the vagrant allow himself to be photographed in a series of poses. Eventually, in the course of their brief photo session, it is discovered that the vagrant happens to be Argentinean, which provokes a profound unease in Rousselot. The moment merits a closer look:

> El clochard se puso a tararear un tango y luego le dijo que llevaba más de quince años viviendo en Europa, donde había alcanzado la felicidad y, en ocasiones, la sabiduría. Rousselot se dio cuenta de que ahora el clochard lo tuteaba, lo que no había hecho cuando hablaban en francés … Se sintió abrumado y tristísimo, como si supiera que al final del día iba a asomarse a un abismo. (106)

While this bizarre encounter seemingly defies rationalization, it nonetheless underscores the nature of Rousselot's photography as more than just leisurely observation; rather, his attempt to capture a whimsical, cosmopolitan landscape leads him through a series of poses that have been planned and paid-for in full—this is, as Valeria de los Ríos has pointed out, a commercial transaction (252). The vagrant initially occupies the role of the other, the unsuspecting object of the wanderer's idle gaze, though ultimately reveals himself to be a parody of the starving expatriate intellectual. What unsettles Rousselot here, of course, is that their respective social statuses have been leveled, and he is confronted with a reflection of himself.[6] Indeed, the final scene of the story finds Rousselot penniless, asking Simone for money that he promises to repay "con el treinta por ciento de interés" (112).

There are several such moments of disquiet throughout "El viaje de Álvaro Rousselot," and they invariably point to questions concerning creative transcendence and the nature of local, in contrast with universal, literature. At one point the narrator, drawing on Rousselot's unfamiliarity with the work of Proust, tells us:

> Esta noche soñaré con Proust, se dijo … Para colmo, esa noche no soñó con Proust sino con Buenos Aires, donde encontraba a miles de Riquelmes instalados en el Pen Club argentino, todos con un billete para viajar a Francia, todos gritando, todos maldiciendo un nombre, el nombre de una persona o de una cosa que Rousselot no oía bien, tal vez se trataba de un trabalenguas, de una contraseña que nadie quería desvelar pero que los devoraba por dentro. (109)

Again, the image of the faux-cosmopolitan Latin American novelist appears as a haunting specter of what Rousselot's trip to France signifies. The moments of disorientation, irrationality and physical illness that punctuate his visit are clearly attributable to a plunge into Dionysian excess that brings him closer to the condition of his compatriot Riquelme, whom “Paris había convertido … en una fuerza de naturaleza contra la que no cabía ninguna oposición” (106). By the end of the story, there is indeed a sense in which Paris has completely transformed Rousselot, a realization reached by the protagonist himself following a strangely anti-climactic meeting with his plagiarizer Morini:

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[6] This encounter between Rousselot and the *clochard* evokes the Cortázar short story "Las babas del diablo," in which the protagonist, while walking along the banks of the Seine, takes a photo of a couple and later, studying a blow-up of the photo, engages psychologically with an animated re-enactment of the scene he had captured. Daniel R. Reedy argues that the protagonist, Roberto Michel, "figuratively descends into the depths of his own mind through the aid of his camera in which he manages to capture a picture of an impending state of transformation … it appears quite possible that Roberto Michel is witnessing a dramatic revelation from his own unconscious" (226).

> Después Rousselot escribió sobre un papel la dirección del hotel en París y el hotel en que paraba actualmente y se la metió en un bolsillo del pantalón al cineasta. El acto le pareció reprobable, gestualmente reprobable, pero luego, mientras caminaba de regreso a Arromanches, todos los gestos y todas las acciones que había hecho en París le parecieron reprobables, vanos, sin sentido, incluso ridículos. Debería suicidarme, pensó mientras caminaba por la orilla del mar. (112)

This final encounter between Rousselot and Morini throws Rousselot’s writerly cowardice into stark relief. Far from the classic Bolaño motif of the combative writer, prepared to defend his work to the death, Rousselot confronts his plagiarizer with equanimity. In essence, his final reflection on the complete irrationality of his behavior in Paris is symbolic of a certain loss of balance between the Apollonian restraint that governed his comfortable life in Argentina, and the Dionysian chaos—represented by the Parisian experience—that lures him towards the abyss of decadence. It is necessary, therefore, to consider the ways in which Bolaño critically re-writes Paris, summoning on one hand its traditional representations of debauched eroticism, while also exposing the ruthless commercial structure that drives artistic production.

VI. Buenos Aires vs. Paris: Artistic Appropriation and Commercial Exploitation

Characteristic of what we have seen to be true with Bolaño, his unbridled disdain for the dominant literary establishment throughout Latin America ultimately becomes a broader criticism of the malignant impact of economic interest on artistic creativity. To be sure, nationalistic literature is a common bogeyman, frequently reviled by Bolaño, but lurking close at hand are dangerous notions of modernization and the commodification of art. Paris appears as the metonymic representation of this trend, and through a series of correspondences between Paris-Buenos Aires and Morini-Rousselot, Bolaño traces the complex dynamic at play between the two literary capitals. Through the relationship between Rousselot and Morini—an extended metaphor for artistic appropriation and commercial exploitation—Bolaño points to the notion of decline on both sides of the Atlantic, raising crucial questions concerning the meaning of literature in a rapidly-shifting commercial landscape.

Early in the story Paris is portrayed in terms of a perceived literary superiority, the narrative voice noting at one point: "Los franceses, que desconfían por principio de nuestros premios municipales de literatura, tardaron en traducir y publicar *La familia del malabarista*" (95). It is seen, in a general sense, as a signifier of literary accomplishment and acceptance; indeed, having been translated and published in France bestows upon Rousselot a level of prestige not necessarily shared by his peers. Yet there is also an aura of uncertainty and precariousness, a sense in which Paris represents an unknown, alienating space that is hostile to Latin America. Rousselot's own fear upon arriving at the airport is described as such: "En realidad había estado a punto de llorar por miedo a quedarse solo y, sobre todo, por el miedo de ir a París y enfrentar el misterio que allí le aguardaba" (97). Paris is framed as a remedy for Latin American insularity, an avenue through which a writer could overcome an ingrained herd mentality and discover one's own literary voice. Rousselot, sobbing at the airport before departing, is once again an object worthy of ridicule, the epitome of the cowardly writer who lacks both individuality and universal ambition. At the same time, however, there is a sense of pending danger surrounding the Parisian experience, felt keenly by Rousselot because his trip is centered around a possible confrontation with Morini, at one point described as "su mejor lector, el único para el que verdaderamente escribía, el único que era capaz de responderle" (95).

Following Rousselot's arrival in France we note a distinct shift in Bolaño's portrayal of literary enterprise. The camaraderie of Buenos Aires literary circles suddenly gives way to stark images of a cut-throat publishing hub, and Rousselot's disillusionment is swift:

> La verdad es que en la editorial tampoco sabían quién era Rousselot, aunque éste les afirmó que había publicado dos libros suyos … hasta que finalmente un tipo de unos cincuenta años … lo reconoció y acto seguido, con una seriedad impropia (y que además no venía al caso), procedió a informarle de que las ventas de sus libros habían sido muy malas. (97)

He follows along on this Kafkaesque series of rejections, and winds up at another publishing house, "notablemente más pequena que la anterior" (97-98), where his attempts to contact Morini are met with a mixture of indifference and mild amusement. Rousselot's conversation with the editor offers a revealing glimpse of the Parisian book industry:

> Los parisinos son unos caníbales, dijo el editor … Desde Camus, dijo, aquí lo único que interesa es el dinero. Rousselot lo miró sin entender sus palabras. No supo si el editor había querido decir que tras la muerte de Camus entre los intelectuales sólo primaba el dinero o si Camus había instituido entre los artistas la ley de la oferta y la demanda … A

> mí no me interesa el dinero, susurró. Ni a mí tampoco, pobre amigo mío, dijo el editor, y véame dónde estoy. (99)

The reference to money in this scene is particularly crucial. There is, on one hand, heavy irony in the fact that Rousselot arrives in Paris rather comfortable financially, and the story ends with him broke. But there is also a more explicit commentary on the economic factors that have shaped the publishing industry and, as a result, literary output. Marcy Schwartz notes the somewhat predatory relationship between French publishers and the Latin American literary establishment:

> French publishers took advantage of the Latin American rejection of and disassociation from Spanish cultural models and industry. Literary entrepreneurs like Garnier and Ollendorf recognized an ignored market that they could develop at home and abroad. While publishers in Latin America continued to print European authors, perpetuating a dependence on European literary culture, European publishers were appropriating the production of Latin American letters … The commonly fictionalized theme of Paris as an international or artistic capital … not only drew many Latin Americans to Europe but also fueled the projects of urban modernity as well. The literary capital expands the literate city that is already powerful locally and regionally into an extensive network of publishing, advertising and media contracts. (19)

Throughout "El viaje de Álvaro Rousselot" there is a constant interplay between the novels written by Rousselot that receive distribution and readership in Europe through translation, and the films, plagiarized by Morini, that arrive in Buenos Aires theaters from Paris. There is essentially a sharp division that pits the Argentine literary establishment, rallying behind Rousselot to initiate plagiarism proceedings, against the Parisian media machine. Indeed, when

Morini diverges from Rousselot’s work, it is because he is perhaps “apurado por deudas o absorbido por el remolino del negocio cinematográfico” (95).

Coursing through the text, then, is an implicit criticism of plagiarism as a form of artistic appropriation. Aside from the more obvious nod to Borges (“Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote”), perhaps a more apt frame of reference would be Ricardo Piglia’s plagiarism of Leonid Andreyev in “Homenaje a Roberto Arlt.”[7] In her article on metaplagiarism in Piglia’s text, Ellen McCracken argues that “Piglia’s homage to Arlt is an intervention into the classic polemic about civilization and barbarism … Piglia has barbarized a European text, enabling Argentine literature to assert itself with a vengeance against the hegemonic European model” (1075). Drawing on Sarmiento’s false French quotation at the beginning of *Facundo*, she cites Piglia’s homage to Arlt as “a critical continuation of the Argentine tradition of appropriating European texts” (1075). What Bolaño has done here is turn this theme on its head; it is the ‘civilized’ Parisian who has appropriated the ‘barbarous’ texts of Rousselot, thereby challenging the entire notion of an enlightened Paris. The former glory that Argentine writers had appropriated is illusory, corrupted by the influence of economic gain and, in effect, barbarized.

As a result, we find that Bolaño’s representation of Paris is rather conflicted. The criticism of provincial literature, for Bolaño so closely associated with notions of popularity and insipid homogeneity, is far from subtle. In this sense, Paris as a cultural symbol seems to stand as a viable antidote to local tendencies. It is also clear, however, that Paris as reality ultimately acquires darker hues, suggesting corruption and decline; the traditional signifiers of Parisian superiority—enlightenment, cosmopolitanism, refinement—are called into question. One striking example is a scene in which Rousselot and Simone take a taxi ride through the streets of Paris, transfixed by the cityscape:

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[7] In the text in question, Piglia attributes a largely plagiarized story initially written by Andreyev, “Las tinieblas,” to Roberto Arlt, under the title “Luba” (McCracken 1072). Bolaño, while acknowledging Piglia’s talent, is quick to condemn his tribute to Arlt: “Piglia me parece uno de los mejores narradores actuales de Latinoamérica. Lo que pasa es que no puedo soportar el desvarío—un desvarío gangsteril, de la pesada—que Piglia teje alrededor de Arlt, probablemente el único inocente en este asunto … No puedo estar, de alguna manera, a favor de los malos traductores de ruso … y no puedo aceptar el plagio como una de las bellas artes” (*Entre paréntesis* 27).

> El trayecto en taxi lo realizaron ambos en silencio, mirando cada uno por su ventanilla las luces y las sombras que surgían de donde uno menos se lo esperaba, como si a determinada hora y en determinados barrios la ciudad de luz se transformara en una ciudad rusa del medievo o en las imágenes de tales ciudades que los directores de cine soviético entregaban de vez en cuando al público en sus películas. (102)

Bolaño's meaning is a tad elusive here, though we imagine the underlying suggestion to be one of darkness interplaying with light, a juxtaposition of barbarism lurking amidst civilization, which seems to indicate that the distinction between the two is arbitrary. The scene also foregrounds Paris's status as a textual construct—a feature that, incidentally, critics of *Rayuela* have also noted of Julio Cortázar's Paris.

Indeed, it is difficult to ignore *Rayuela* as a possible influence, insofar as its treatment of the contrast between Buenos Aires and Paris is concerned, on "El viaje de Álvaro Rousselot," and it is likely that Bolaño is engaging in a kind of dialogue with Cortázar. We recall in particular that Horacio Oliveira, like Álvaro Rousselot, straddles an ambiguous double existence between Buenos Aires and Paris, and that, as Julie Jones reminds us, "His rejection of those things dear to the nineteenth-century novel—common decency, home, family—leads Oliveira to abandon the security of Buenos Aires and to take up life on the Left Bank" (225). On the other hand, however, there are also explicit criticisms of Buenos Aires as provincial:

> Para sentir la distancia que lo aislaba ahora de ese columbario, Oliveira no tenía más que remedar, con una sonrisa agria, las decantadas frases y los ritmos lujosos del ayer, los

> modos áulicos de decir y callar … En Buenos Aires, capital de miedo, volvía a sentirse rodeado por ese discreto allanamiento de artistas que se da en llamar buen sentido. (75:506)

There is an implied assumption, in identifying Buenos Aires as a place of death and aligning it chronologically with “ayer,” that Paris represents the opposite, which is to say a place of progress and enlightened modernity. The artistic criticism is quite explicit, and anticipates Bolaño’s later condemnation of stagnation within the Argentine writing establishment. Nataly Tcherepashenets, moreover, points to the political subtext of *Rayuela,* and suggests a possible connection between Oliveira’s departure from Buenos Aires and Cortázar’s own views of his home country, noting that they “appear to share anxiety caused by the prospering of distorted Peronist values and the limiting nationalistic vision of the country dominant in the cultural discourse of the time” (165).

There is also a clear sense in which the notion of Oliveira’s supposed Parisian sophistication, rooted in order and philosophical reflection, is meant to contrast sharply with La Maga’s effortless intuition and freedom—a distinction that Cortázar seems to call into question, given Horacio’s eventual descent into madness. Paris, for Bolaño, occupies a similarly ambiguous space. It stands as the enlightened alternative to Latin American provincialism, but ultimately the binary separating them is dismantled, as it becomes clear that Paris cannot, in fact, provide any transcendent guidance for Rousselot. His journey leads him through the dark alleys of modernity, and it leaves him as much adrift as Héctor Pereda at the end of “El gaucho insufrible.” There is, nonetheless, a suggestion of literary greatness in the closing lines: “El resto del día Rousselot lo pasó como si en realidad fuera un escritor argentino, algo de lo que había empezado a dudar en los últimos días o tal vez en los últimos años, no sólo en lo que concernía a él sino también en lo tocante a la posible literatura argentina” (113). The word “posible” here is significant, as it implies the exploration of new territory, which is constituted in notions of deconstruction and renewal.

Again, Bolaño is playing with notions of what it means to ‘belong’ to a particular country’s literary establishment. The irony lies in the fact that at this moment Rousselot is far from Buenos Aires and, moreover, completely disconnected from his former existence. What gives him potential, it would seem, is his current anchorless and penniless state; he has abandoned the order and comfort that had governed his life in Argentina, and has embraced his newfound position at the margins of society. At this point in the story we come closest to what might be considered a declaration of Bolaño’s aesthetic: that is to say, real literature is generated from an unflinching confrontation with the chaos and uncertainty of everyday life. At the same time, it is clear that this disorder must be balanced with a degree of rational control and a focused, creative vision. The Paris of “El viaje de Álvaro Rousselot,” with its cannibalistic artistic culture and capitalist orientation toward commercial success, is at odds with this aesthetic. Yet it has the virtue of jarring Rousselot from the banality of the literary scene to which he previously belonged, prompting a reformulation of artistic outlook. These ideas are also in line with Bolaño’s views on literary exile—namely, the fact that literature in and of itself should be a form of adventure. One need not journey to Paris in order to become enlightened; having read Proust, perhaps, is sufficient. The city envisioned by his generation and those before it, Bolaño seems to say, is a fiction that masks a darker, corrupting force.

In this more general sense, Paris, for Bolaño, represents the misguided pretensions of universalism held by writers of his generation. As in “El gaucho insufrible,” the playful caricaturing of these writers points to the continual conflict between the provincial and the cosmopolitan, which of course harkens back to the debate between civilization and barbarism. The journeys of both Héctor Pereda and Álvaro Rousselot, constructed as heroes' quests, enact this tension, taking as their point of departure lives governed by order and structure in Buenos Aires, and concluding in a state of crisis that leads to reawakening. Significantly, though, their paths diverge in opposite directions, with Pereda escaping in the direction of tradition, and Rousselot shuttling toward modernity. Ultimately, neither Paris nor the pampa provides the protagonists with adequate means of transcending the circumstances that had prompted their initial journeys. Bolaño, in effect, challenges these distinctions between civilization and barbarism, positing instead a vision of literature and society in which the individual must enter unknown territories of human experience and attempt to emerge with insight and understanding.

Chapter 2:
“No hay consuelo en los libros”: Fascism and Literary Crisis in *Nocturno de Chile* and *Monsieur Pain*

In the previous chapter of this study, we saw how Bolaño invokes the dialectic between Apollo and Dionysus as a means of suggesting a kind of aesthetic reawakening that springs from submersion in the chaotic and incomprehensible elements of existence. Within this dynamic, however, it is clear that rational insight must be applied as a counterbalance to decadence. In her study *Madness in Literature*, Lillian Feder offers a useful interpretation of Nietzsche’s continuum presented in this context of breakdown and subsequent regeneration:

> A fundamental contradiction in Nietzsche’s psychology lies in his conception of this psychic state, the breakdown of individuation. On the one hand, Apollo, “the glorious divine image of the *principium individuationis*,” symbolizes the very principle which must “collapse” if human beings are to reach a state of ecstatic harmony with nature. On the other hand, this undifferentiated state, without the intervention of the Apollonian, is a hazardous one, leading only to barbaric ‘sensuality and cruelty.’ (208)

In this chapter I will explore in greater depth the ways in which Bolaño re-configures this dialectic to raise questions concerning how literature engages with political reality; more specifically, I will address notions of literary complicity with fascism in *Nocturno de Chile* and *Monsieur Pain*. The former presents us with the feverish deathbed confessional of Sebastián Urrutia Lacroix, a Catholic priest whose first-person narrative may be broadly read as an act of penitence in the face of years of silence in the midst of authoritarian violence and repression. I will show how Urrutia Lacroix’s outward pretense of Apollonian formal perfection connotes a retreat from political engagement, which collapses into a form of literary fascism. As in “El gaucho insufrible” and “El viaje de Álvaro Rousselot,” Bolaño situates Urrutia Lacoix’s confessional in the Baudelairean framework of the wandering subject displaced by the collapse of an established order. This journey, as we will see, culminates in a moment of self-recognition that hints at the possibility of a more socially-engaged aesthetic.

In *Monsieur Pain*, one of Bolaño's lesser-discussed works, we find another incarnation of the wandering detective figure. Its first-person narration centers on the hallucinatory experiences of Pierre Pain, the infirm and possibly mad protagonist. Throughout the novel we find that the subtext of animal magnetism underpins a broader aesthetic conflict between rational control and the disruptive power of unconscious visions induced through varying forms of illness and madness. Through Pain's struggle to revive a dying César Vallejo, a separate undercurrent develops, in which surrealism emerges as a potential utopia in the midst of a looming fascist infiltration. Like animal magnetism, surrealism appears in problematic terms, associated with empty abstraction and sterile intellectualism. In both works, then, the recurring dialectic between Apollo and Dionysus may be used to better understand Bolaño's conception of literature as a series of fragile utopias, perpetually subject to the instability of modern society.

I. Illusion and the Apollonian Ideal in *Nocturno de Chile*

Early in *Nocturno de Chile*, the literary critic Farewell tells Urrutia Lacroix: "En este país de bárbaros … ese camino [del crítico literario] no es de rosas. En este país de dueños de fundo … la literatura es una rareza y carece de mérito el saber leer" (14). The subsequent literary gathering at his estate—an oft-recurring motif throughout Bolaño's work, in this instance suffused with heavy irony—sets the stage for a withering criticism of nationalism and the unsavory relationship between the dominant literary establishment and repressive government. Concerning *Là-bas*, the name given to Farewell's estate, Paula Aguilar argues: "*Là-bas* como espacio de la civilización, cerrado, alejado de la ciudad, corporiza el distanciamiento torremarfilista entre arte y vida … que denuncia el espacio externo como barbarie, denuncia que cambia paradójicamente de signo con la presencia de marcas simbólicas que relacionan -a modo de antecedente que prefigura- ese espacio cerrado con la dictadura" (132-133). Aguilar's analysis posits a subversion of distinctions between civilization and barbarism, much like what we saw in "El gaucho insufrible" and "El viaje de Álvaro Rousselot." Indeed, there are several clues within *Nocturno de Chile* that point to the notion of *Là-bas* as an infernal, corrupted space. Urrutia Lacroix's initial description of Farewell upon arriving at his estate, for example, is suggestive: "Parecía el dios Pan, o Baco en su madriguera, o algún demente conquistador español enquistado en su fortín del sur" (19). And perhaps more ominous is the description given to the living space itself: "llamar living a aquella sala era un pecado, más bien se asemejaba a una biblioteca y a un pabellón de caza, con muchas estanterías llenas de enciclopedias y diccionarios y souvenirs … amén de por lo menos una docena de cabezas disecadas" (19). Taken as a whole, the dream-like images that cluster around Lacroix's first visit to *Là-bas* form a backdrop that evokes the melding of predatory government policy with the entire literary tradition of Chile—a notion reinforced by Urrutia Lacroix's musing that Farewell was "el estuario en donde se refugiaban, por períodos cortos o largos, todas las embarcaciones literarias de la patria" (23).

There is moreover, as Aguilar reminds us, a direct reference to J.K. Huysmans' novel *Là-bas*, which merits close attention here, as it positions Lacroix's narrative within a framework of escapism. In her study on illusion in Huysmans' works, Ruth B. Antosh outlines a general trajectory that sheds considerable light on Urrutia Lacroix's condition:

> The main characters of Huysmans' novels are all dreamers in two senses of the word. Not only are they subject to visions and hallucinations … but they are in search of an impossible goal … This goal or dream generally represents an escape from the ugliness

> or banality of the everyday world, a world with which Huysmans' characters cannot cope due to a moral and spiritual passiveness which makes them incapable of decisive action. (31)

Incidentally, Antosh's diagnosis offers a close approximation to the increasing psychological isolation seen in Urrutia Lacroix as his confessional unfolds. In an analysis that rings familiar, Antosh notes of Huysmans' protagonists: "their retreat from reality does not meet with the success they desire, for once left alone with their own memories, they inevitably come to a confrontation with some aspect of themselves which they would rather ignore" (81). The otherworldly sequence of events taking place at *Là-bas* not only foreshadows Urrutia Lacroix's complete withdrawal into his own psyche through literary endeavor, but also echoes Bolaño's despairing conception of barbaric literature as "un oasis de horror." It is noteworthy that, shortly after Urrutia Lacroix's arrival at *Là-bas*, he experiences a sudden wave of intoxication that causes disorientation: "De pronto, acaso debido a la ingestión franca de licores, me sentí enfermo … se trataba tan sólo de una zozobra pasajera que el aire puro de campo se encargaría de evaporar" (25). Yet his nocturnal wandering through the cold, labyrinthine wilderness not only fails to alleviate his nausea, but in fact induces an even greater swell of unease: "Salí por el lado equivocado. No estaba enfrente de la casa principal sino de unos huertos que parecían dejados de la mano de Dios … no pude desterrar unas nauseas inmensas. Me sentí caer en el vacío intestinal, un vacío hecho de estómagos y de entrañas" (29). As a result, Bolaño establishes a sharp division between the wilderness outside of Farewell's "hunting lodge"—a hostile environment marked by chaos and uncertainty—and the literary gathering inside, ostensibly a sanctuary, though one that provides no relief from the torments of the outside world. The overriding implication, then, is that the only escape from the barbarism of daily life is a literary refuge that masquerades as civilization, but in reality represents decay and complicity with authoritarian violence.

It is also significant that during his wandering through gardens and getting lost at *Là-bas*, Urrutia Lacroix is hounded by "la sombra de Sordello" (70). Among the litany of intertextual references in *Nocturno de Chile*, the presence of the Italian troubador Sordello looms large, returning insistently to haunt Urrutia Lacroix with the refrain "Sordel, Sordello, ¿qué Sordello?" (29). While his likeness has been appropriated by a number of poets,[8] it will be useful to look in particular at the way in which Robert Browning portrays his poetic aspirations in the poem "Sordello." Stopford Brooke offers the following interpretation of Browning's protagonist:

> He shares fully in the impassioned individuality of the time … All the dreams of his youth centre in himself; Nature becomes the reflection of himself; all histories of great men he represents as in himself; finally, he becomes to himself Apollo, the incarnation of poetry. But he does not seek to realize his individuality, any more than his curiosity, in action … he finds that the public does not understand him, and flies back to his solitude, back to his own soul. (184)

It is certainly not coincidental that Urrutia Lacroix himself resides similarly in a world of dreams, in which all interactions with the external world appear to us as products of his own imagination. Indeed, one of the fundamental structural facets of *Nocturno de Chile* is the unreliable first-person narration, laden with a heavy irony that serves to drive insurmountable distance between Urrutia Lacroix and those with whom he comes in contact in the concrete world—or, more accurately, those with whom he claims to come in contact. In Nietzsche's conception of the Apollo-Dionysus dialectic, this disconnect from external reality is firmly in line with the Apollonian ideal. In *The Birth of Tragedy* he writes: “the lovely semblance of the world of dreams is his [Apollo’s] realm … the higher truth, the perfection of these dream-states in contrast to the only partially intelligible reality of the daylight world, raise him to the status of a prophetic god, but equally certainly to that of an artistic god” (120).

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[8] Most notably, see Ezra Pound's "Canto II," which begins: "Hang it all, Robert Browning, / there can be but the one "Sordello." / But Sordello, and my Sordello?" (1-3).

Following the Pinochet coup, Urrutia Lacroix questions his—and others’—engagement with the concrete world, which is repeatedly conflated with the world of dreams: “era como si todos hubiéramos despertado de golpe de un sueño a la vida real, aunque en ocasiones la sensación era diametralmente opuesta, como si de golpe todos estuviéramos soñando … Hablamos. Comemos. Pero en realidad estamos intentando no pensar que hablamos, no pensar que comemos” (99). The ideal toward which he strives is distinctly Apollonian—an artistic mask covering a grotesque reality—though we will see that he ultimately succumbs to the Dionysian. Returning to Sordello, Brooke notes the inner conflict that Browning seeks to address in “Sordello,” which concerns the necessity of the poet to confront both the beauty and harshness of human life: “a poet must not live like Sordello, in abstractions, nor shrink from the shock of men and circumstance, nor refuse to take men and life as they are—but throw himself into the vital present, with its difficulties, baffling elements and limitations” (205). This is essentially the aesthetic vacuum in which Urrutia Lacroix finds himself; his narration by its very nature is steeped in the imaginary, abstracted past, and he reveals himself to be perpetually alienated, incapable of coping with the present. In an apparent search for meaning, Urrutia Lacroix plunges, like Durtal from *Là-bas* (Antosh 101), into literary creation, but winds up increasingly lost.

It is at this point in the novel, coinciding with the overthrow of Allende, that we find Urrutia Lacroix immersing himself in Greek literature and mythology, another mechanism of escape from a hostile and confusing reality. In his book *Albert Camus' Critique of Modernity*, Ronald Srigley comments on modern fascination with Greek mythology and, in particular, Albert Camus' personal retreat into this canon: "When society becomes so disordered politically and intellectually that it is no longer possible to participate in it reasonably … they will attempt to secure a measure of order for themselves by searching for alternatives to their society … through the investigation of historical civilizations" (13). He goes on to argue: "The Greeks did not take the path toward totalitarianism and technology that we moderns have taken. For those of us like Camus with reservations about our decision to do so … thinking about why the Greeks chose not to is a potentially illuminating inquiry" (14). This is, arguably, not the line of inquiry undertaken by Urrutia Lacroix throughout the novel, though it nevertheless points to the notion of evasion in a society in the process of collapse. After all, one of the cornerstones of Nietzsche's thinking on the Apollo-Dionysus principle concerns the optimism of the Greeks in the face of strife. He writes: "The Greeks knew the terrors and horrors of existence, but they covered them with a veil in order to be able to live … If someone had removed the artistic *semblance* of that *middle world*, the Greeks would have had to follow the wisdom of the wood-god, the companion of *Dionysos*" (124-25). In *Nocturno de Chile* we find that the shelter of Greek literature intersperses closely with national catastrophes that assume the form of background noise for Urrutia Lacroix: "y se organizó la primera marcha de las cacerolas en contra de Allende y yo leí a Esquilo y a Sófocles y a Eurípides … y en Chile hubo escasez e inflación y mercado negro y largas colas para conseguir comida … y hubo atentados y yo leí a Tucídides " (98). In the midst of the chaos enveloping Chile, Urrutia Lacroix blithely takes refuge in Greek literature, content to remain distant from political turmoil. Following his brief stint as an inspector of crumbling churches in Europe, he returns to Chile and muses: "La situación en la patria no era buena. No hay que soñar, sino ser consecuente, me decía. No hay que perderse tras una quimera sino ser patriota, me decía" (96). Given his subsequent retreat into the Greek tradition, we have strong reason to doubt his adherence to these patriotic calls to arms.

In this regard Urrutia Lacroix becomes a parody of Browning's Sordello, who must struggle to overcome an innate attachment to his own poetic vision of himself. Brooke explains: "Sordello will not become the actual artist till he lose his self-involvement and find his soul [*sic*] … in love of man … Nor can Sordello's imagination reach true passion, for it ignores that which chiefly makes the artist; union with the passions of mankind" (172). What Brooke traces here is precisely the Apollo-Dionysus continuum developed by Nietzsche—Sordello holds the Apollonian exaltation of the individual as the principal artistic end, but loses himself in abstractions, failing to recognize the need for connection with humanity, and he eventually "dies of the striving to find an anchorage for life" (181). Urrutia Lacroix, too, collapses under the weight of his dreams and silences; the Dionysiac impulse, while largely suppressed throughout his narration, remains a latent, threatening force. At a crucial turning point within the novel he reflects:

> Después no sé lo que me pasó. De angélica mi poesía se tornó demoníaca … Escribía sobre mujeres a las que zahería sin piedad, escribía sobre invertidos, sobre niños perdidos en estaciones de trenes abandonadas. Mi poesía siempre había sido, para decirlo en una palabra, apolínea, y lo que ahora me salía más bien era, por llamarlo tentativamente de algún modo, dionisíaco. Pero en realidad no era poesía dionisíaca. Tampoco demoníaca. Era rabiosa. (101)

There is a direct association established between this shift in his aesthetic and the rise of Pinochet, suggesting deeper political reverberations at the root of Urrutia Lacroix's psychological transformation. Nonetheless, he demonstrates an ironic inability to acknowledge this change as such, and continues to justify peerless control over his psyche: “Mi vida cotidiana … era de lo más tranquila. Hablaba a media voz, nunca me enojaba, era puntual y ordenado … A veces tenía pesadillas, pero por aquel tiempo, quien más, quien menos, todo el mundo sufría alguna pesadilla de vez en cuando” (101-102). In other words, in the face of deeper discord Urrutia Lacroix retreats even further into his imagination, privileging an aesthetic of dreams and poetic immortality over the stark reality of crisis unfolding around him.

Returning briefly to Camus, we find an illuminating parallel in his conception of modern madness, as sketched by Srigley. Referring to Camus’ reflection on Calypso’s offer of immortality to Odysseus, he notes: “The nature of modern life is a direct result of its central ambition. That ambition is a “fanatical” attempt to achieve immortality and a willingness to indulge every excess and exceed every limit necessary in order to do so” (1). Moreover, Camus himself grapples, in an essay entitled “The Enigma,” with the nature of artistic immortality, about which he writes: “Let us then praise society, which can so cheaply teach us every day, by its very homages, that the greatness which it honours is worthless. The louder the sound, the quicker it dies” (143). His indictment of mediocre artists continues: “I read about a fashionable author who was considered to spend every night presiding over heady Bacchanalian orgies … One might doubtless have wondered how he found the time to write a series of books that filled several library shelves” (143). To say that this vision of the corruption of artistic values and the ephemeral nature of literature resonates with Bolaño is an understatement, as his well-publicized scorn for the presumption of the literary establishment attests. In *Nocturno de Chile* these concerns surface in the Heldenberg story that Farewell relates to Urrutia Lacroix, provoking questions regarding Lacroix’s own motives for composing his narrative in the first place.

It is important to observe from the outset that Farewell's immortality tale immediately follows and essentially counters Urrutia Lacroix's meandering story of Ernst Jünger and Salvador Reyes, a story also about literary immortality, though one that glorifies the notion rather than questioning it. Urrutia Lacroix's story features three figures—the reclusive Guatemalan painter living in Paris, Salvador Reyes, and Ernst Jünger—whose common ground seems to lie in their inevitable destiny as forgotten artists. Nevertheless, Urrutia Lacroix ironically closes the story with "una visión donde el donaire se vertía, bruñido como el sueño de los héroes." He envisions Ernst Jünger in a space ship crashing into the Andes, and tells Farewell: "el cuerpo impoluto del héroe sería conservado … la escritura de los héroes y, por extensión, los amanuenses de la escritura de los héroes eran en sí mismos un canto, un canto de alabanza a Dios y a la civilización" (51). Here we uncover an additional layer of irony implicit in the history of Ernst Jünger himself, whose fascist leanings and vision of the 'anarch' figure present striking parallels to Urrutia Lacroix's posture of insular complacency. Of the 'anarch' archetype, Elliot Neaman explains: "The anarch … is an individual who plays by all the rules, externally, but in the private world refuses to conform to society's expectations" (186). Neaman proceeds to describe Jünger's exaltation of "a new age in which mythology will replace destructive rationality" (188), and furthermore notes the somewhat paradoxical collapse of bold resistance into what arguably constitutes "a quietistic retreat from political engagement" (188).

In many ways Urrutia Lacroix embodies the fundamental stance of the 'anarch' figure, forced to exist within an authoritarian framework, though not willing to offer an ideological alternative at odds with the establishment, instead withdrawing into solitude. As a result, there is undeniable irony in Lacroix's overwrought paean to Jünger and his immortal writings as "alabanza a Dios y a la civilización." In Bolaño's cosmovision this abstract ideal, in which the passive acceptance of humanity's barbaric nature dissolves any need for social engagement, is symptomatic of a dangerous, nihilistic literary cowardice. It is an ideal consistent with Jünger's fatalist conception of society, generally defined by the idea "that one could change the world, but never its foundation. And such a foundation was the pessimist, uncompassionate template with which we have become fully acquainted … it was this alternation of light and darkness that culminated in the question mark of the Void" (Preparata 149). Farewell, likely acting here as a mouthpiece for Bolaño, flatly rejects this notion of apolitical detachment in a pithy condemnation of Lacroix's worldview: "me dijo que las palabras de Salvador Reyes me habían impresionado. Mala cosa. Querer es bueno. Impresionarse es malo" (51).

Undoubtedly sensing the naïve, exaggerated grandiosity of Urrutia Lacroix's heroic vision, he responds with the Heldenberg story, which revolves around an anonymous shoemaker in the Austro-Hungarian Empire who sets about erecting a monument to commemorate the Empire's greatest heroes—"No sólo a los héroes del pasado y a los héroes del presente, sino también a los héroes del futuro" (56). It quickly becomes clear that, just as Urrutia Lacroix is earlier superimposed with Ernst Jünger, the juxtaposition developed in the Heldenberg story configures Lacroix as a double of the Austro-Hungarian shoemaker, whose immortality project "luego cayó en el olvido como suele suceder con todo" (60). Indeed, much like Urrutia Lacroix, the shoemaker is seduced by "su sueño obsesivo" (59), a vision of immortality fused with a sense of nationalist heroism, embodied earlier by Jünger. Furthermore, his feverish drive to finish the Heldenberg monument bears strong resemblance to Urrutia Lacroix's desperate composition of his narrative. The shoemaker's final moments are related as such: "se estremecía en su lecho y hablaba solo y pronunciaba la palabra corazón y también la palabra fulgor y parecía que se ahogaba" (59). The project is, of course, doomed to fail, and is eventually lost in a haze of war and destruction, summoning a familiar realization in Bolaño's work—the idea that heroes and their national literature are as fleeting as the empires to which they belong.

Farewell's cautionary tale cuts from several angles; on one hand it reinforces Bolaño's skepticism regarding poetic immortality and the oblivion it entails. The shoemaker's all-consuming labor represents a dangerous withdrawal from society into the realm of abstraction—a move, in Bolaño's eyes, akin to madness. There is also a sense in which the interplay between the two stories resuscitates the conflict between civilization and barbarism, calling into question Jünger's passive-heroic vision of violence and cyclical power as an inescapable facet of modern civilization. Urrutia Lacroix later parrots this stance, seemingly in self-justification, when he reflects:

> Todos, tarde o temprano, iban a volver a compartir el poder. Derecha, centro, izquierda, todos de la misma familia. Problemas éticos, algunos. Problemas estéticos, ninguno. Hoy gobierna un socialista y vivimos exactamente igual … ¡El orden de los factores no altera el producto! ¡Ningún problema! ¡Sólo un poco de fiebre! ¡Sólo tres actos de locura! ¡Sólo un brote psicótico excesivamente prolongado! (120-121)

This quote, in many ways, conjures what Andreea Marinescu refers to as "fascist literary discourse," which, she argues, "presents art as a sphere completely separate from politics and history, thus promoting a conception of the autonomy of art that seeks to cover its violent politics" ("Fascism and Culture" 346). It is this notion of literary fascism that Bolaño subverts throughout *Nocturno de Chile,* suggesting that literature and politics are closely intertwined, and that, furthermore, literature must engage rationally with concrete social reality. It is moreover significant that Urrutia Lacroix chooses to portray this cycle of violence and power in terms of psychological imbalance, an echo of Bolaño's suggestion in "El gaucho insufrible" that the destabilization of society at large is a form of contagion capable of infecting the individual. Urrutia Lacroix, much like Héctor Pereda, attempts to escape from political upheaval into an illusory utopia, though he winds up being consumed by the very madness that he seeks to understand, as the line between reason and insanity becomes blurred. It is in this context that the blithe optimism of Apollo—expressed through the juxtaposed images of Urrutia Lacroix, Sordello and Ernst Jünger —is foregrounded as a precarious façade hiding a barbaric reality.

One of the more revealing illustrations of this pattern is the scene in which Farewell expresses a general disillusionment with literature, prompting a back-and-forth dialogue between Urrutia Lacroix and Farewell on books as shadows: "Y Farewell: de qué sirve la vida, para qué sirven los libros, son sólo sombras … Y yo: Platón tiene un libro muy interesante sobre ese asunto. Y Farewell: no sea idiota. Y yo: ¿qué le dicen esas sombras, Farewell, cuénteme? Y Farewell: me hablan de la multiplicidad de lecturas" (64). Lacroix is of course making reference to Plato's Allegory of the Cave, in which the image of the shadow becomes a meditation on the corrupt, deceptive nature of the external world and the ignorant delusion of those inhabiting it, in contrast with the divine light of knowledge. Gordon Slethaug explains the philosophical underpinnings of this principle:

> Each human being has a fundamental wish for immortality … for thereby a man pursues the good and the beautiful, and his soul is transported from the fleeting material world of the senses to the immutable world of perfect forms. The material world is but a pale shadow, a reflection of an ideal sphere, and man only the remnant of a once perfect whole. Hence, man is torn between the desire for material well-being and that for spiritual beauty and excellence. (9)

Farewell’s invocation of the shadow in this context seems to suggest the notion of books as even more distant from the material world, as they are reacting to, and taking for granted, an inherently flawed ‘shadow’ reality. This dialogue, in a broader sense, foregrounds Bolaño’s recurring preoccupation with literature devoid of a redemptive core, offering instead a mimetic portrayal of a corrupt reality. Indeed, this questioning of the emptiness of literature becomes one of the central conflicts that permeate *Nocturno de Chile*. Urrutia Lacroix’s mention of Plato is rife with irony, as his narrative leans heavily in the direction divine transcendence and literary immortality, yet ends in dissolution. Farewell, by point of contrast, despairs of literature as inconsequential and laments both its impermanence and powerlessness as a redemptive agent. The dialogue continues with Farewell’s attempting to explain his unsettling visions to Urrutia Lacroix: “Y yo: ¿distingue algo cierto en las sombras chinas? … Y Farewell: discierno putas que se detienen una fracción de segundo a contemplar algo importante y luego se marchan como meteoritos” (64-65). Later, as Farewell veers the exchange in the direction of explicit sexual advances, Urrutia Lacroix attempts to rein him in, arguing, “no es usted quien habla, es el vino, son esas sombras que lo inquietan” (65). We return, then, to Farewell as the lecherous, corrupted reflection of Bacchus as he is initially portrayed at *Là-bas*, presiding over a banquet of wine and poetic discourse that, though distant from the political center, is in essence a microcosm of society’s decadence.

II. The Voyage into the Abyss: Reconsidering Baudelaire and the Displaced Subject

Urrutia Lacroix’s primary means of coping with this chaotic reality, as we have seen, entails the painstaking creation of a more comforting, Apollonian world of dreams and illusions. His entire narrative, indeed, is representative of this process. However, another dominant undercurrent coursing through *Nocturno de Chile* is that of the displaced, voyaging subject, familiar now in the context of “El gaucho insufrible” and “El viaje de Álvaro Rousselot,” and in fact central to many of Bolaño’s works. As Cinzia Blum notes in her study of the voyage motif in Italian literature: “As a catalyst for change, the journey is … the paramount figure for movement toward (self-) discovery and expansion as well as dissolution and death” (3). Concerning its more contemporary iteration, she argues: “The new literature of migration shares a fundamental characteristic with postmodern travel literature, as it typically replaces the traditional heroic journey with stories of loss and disillusionment … the migrant-writers, facing walls of indifference or hostility, seek to introduce themselves as historical subjects” (253). This conception of the voyage is undoubtedly at the foundation of Urrutia Lacroix’s narrative, which reads as a desperate attempt at self-vindication in the face of years of silence and the guilt of complicity.

Delving deeper into Urrutia Lacroix’s deathbed confessional as a re-working of the voyage topos, it bears noting that this voyage must be analyzed at both a literal and metaphorical level. Given Bolaño’s extensive commentaries on the nature of illness and the voyage as antidote, it is natural at this point to consider the way in which Urrutia Lacroix’s literal voyages are transformed in such a way as to evoke notions of the Baudelairean voyage into the abyss. The first trip recounted, we recall, is his trip to *Là-bas* to visit Farewell for the first time—a journey that is repeated in vain at the end of the novel, creating an unmistakable sensation of cyclical futility. Particularly noteworthy, however, is the description of a spiritual malaise, depicted in melancholic terms, just before Urrutia Lacroix embarks on the trip: “Cuando llegó el día señalado, partí de la estación con el alma compungida y al mismo tiempo dispuesto para cualquier trago amargo que Dios tuviera a bien infligirme” (16). The trip, far from representing merely a casual jaunt to Chillán, is portrayed essentially as an act of penitence. Paula Aguilar notes the underlying implication of guilt and atonement associated with Lacroix's melancholic condition: "En la visión psicoanalítica, la melancolía indica una disposición enfermiza, trágica asociada a ideas y sentimientos de culpa. Freud la define como un 'conflicto en el interior del yo,' que … evidencia una crisis identitaria a partir de una pérdida: el sujeto queda atrapado en la melancolía al no poder tramitar el duelo" (128). Not coincidentally, traces of melancholy reemerge just prior to Urrutia Lacroix's second major voyage to inspect decaying churches in Europe: "me habían recomendado ferverosamente … para una delicada misión en Europa, sin duda pensando que un viaje prolongado por el viejo continente era lo más indicado para devolverme algo de la alegría y de la energía que había perdido y que a ojos vistas seguía perdiendo y que a la larga causa la muerte, al menos la muerte moral, de quien la padece" (75). The idea of the voyage as a potentially curative agent is at the core of Bolaño's cosmovision, undertaken as an escape from the onslaught of daily life, though ultimately proving nothing more than a doomed plunge into the void. For Urrutia Lacroix, clearly, it represents an attempt to mend what Aguilar describes as "el quiebre interno de una identidad que se creía sólida" (129). Ignacio López-Vicuña echoes this interpretation of Lacroix's preservationist impulse, arguing that it is representative of a broader attempt to maintain "valores tradicionales políticos, sociales y estéticos –y entre ellos, una visión aristocrática de la literatura" (210).

The voyages taken by Urrutia Lacroix throughout *Nocturno de Chile* point not only to his reactionary ideology, but also undoubtedly constitute an attempt at self-examination and salvation—figuratively, a means of forestalling the crumbling of his own psyche. We are invariably drawn back to Bolaño's comments on the voyage in the context of Baudelaire's poetics, particularly in "Literatura+enfermedad=enfermedad," where he writes: "El viaje … es como un barco o una tumultuosa caravana que se dirige hacia el abismo, pero el viajero, lo intuimos en su asco, en su desesperación y en su desprecio, quiere salvarse … Lo que finamente encuentra … es su propia imagen” (*El gaucho insufrible* 151). Urrutia Lacroix’s travels are punctuated with similar undercurrents of desperation and delusion, as indicated, among other places, in his recollections of the maritime voyage to Europe, expressed in transformative terms: “recuperada por fin mi alegría de lector, recuperado mi instinto, curado del todo, mientras el barco surcaba el mar, los crepúsculos marinos, la noche atlántica insondable, y yo leía cómodamente sentado en aquella sala de maderas nobles” (83). There is an implication in this scene that literature possesses an inherently transcendent quality—a notion that is periodically questioned throughout the novel—and is seen here as a life preserver that stills Urrutia Lacroix against the harshness and incomprehensibility of the ocean that surrounds him.

It bears mentioning, too, that there are numerous references to water throughout *Nocturno de Chile*, often evoking a sense that the disorder and confusion of society represents a form of shipwreck. Indeed, one of the dominant motifs through the novella is the metaphor that places Urrutia Lacroix himself at the center of a moral and psychological shipwreck, the fragments of which he struggles to keep in sight. Not surprisingly, then, the rosy optimism of Urrutia Lacroix’s trans-Atlantic journey gives way to descriptions of emotional turbulence and uncertainty, calling to mind the image of Farewell’s estate as a temporary refuge for beleaguered literary vessels: “Ahora el enfermo soy yo. Mi cama gira en un río de aguas rápidas. Si las aguas fueran turbulentas yo sabría que la muerte está cerca. Pero las aguas sólo son rápidas, por lo que aún albergo alguna esperanza” (147-48). This description, incidentally, closely mirrors Nietzsche’s use of maritime imagery to frame the Apollo-Dionysus dialectic. In *The Birth of Tragedy* he writes: “With his sublime gestures, he [Apollo] shows us that the whole world of agony is needed in order to compel the individual to generate the releasing and redemptive vision and then, lost in contemplation of that vision, to sit calmly in his rocking boat in the midst of the sea" (26). Thus the voyage motif that runs throughout *Nocturno de Chile* is heavily tinged with the overriding influence of Apollonian illusion, which consistently shields Lacroix from real engagement with the reality of suffering. Recalling Urrutia Lacroix's fixation on Sordello, one of the fundamental implications of this struggle is the solitude of poetic endeavor as a force of isolation from humanity; indeed, Urrutia Lacroix desperately clings to literature as a protective shield, though he finds that his "immaculate" silences (12) offer scant relief from the anguish that ultimately overcomes him.

This notion of the doomed voyage resurfaces in Urrutia Lacroix's reflections on literary immortality, which remains a constant preoccupation throughout his narrative. In particular, he summons Ernst Jünger and "el viaje a la inmortalidad de los héroes, que viajan únicamente abrigados con sus escritos" (52). This is, in many ways, the journey that Urrutia Lacroix charts for himself in the act of writing his confessional. It is clearly a posture that Bolaño regards with skepticism, as Urrutia Lacroix's voyage ends in shipwreck, and he is forced to face his fractured inner self. The final, harrowing lines of his narrative express this realization with disquieting clarity: "¿soy yo el joven envejecido? ¿Esto es el verdadero, el gran terror, ser yo el joven envejecido que grita sin que nadie lo escuche?" (149-50). Consistent with Bolaño's interpretation of the Baudelairean voyage, Lacroix's frenzied attempt to secure immortality through writing ends in the unavoidable recognition of his own impermanence.

III. *Puer Senex* and the Double in *Nocturno de Chile*

The doubling that underwrites Urrutia Lacroix's narrative is one of the more latent representations of his final state of dissolution, and therefore merits closer consideration. In his study on the double in postmodern narrative, Slethaug argues that the motif "explores a divided and discontinuous self in a fragmented universe," and that it "values artifice over verisimilitude, substitutes writing for experience, pluralizes narrative points of view, and esteems the autotelic and self-referential in fiction" (3). Meanwhile, William Hughes looks back to the 19th century and addresses the psychoanalytical aspects of the doppelgänger in Gothic fiction, noting: "the motif may emblematize the polarity of the unrestrained id against its ego and super-ego counterparts. Thus, the doppelgänger may become … a figure that enacts taboo desires, a seeker of arcane knowledge" (86). A closer look at the psychological dimensions of *Nocturno de Chile* reveals a series of doubles that evoke this tension between rationality and instinct; in addition to the aforementioned *joven envejecido*, there is a split between Urrutia Lacroix, the poet and author of the narrative itself, and H. Ibacache, the literary critic. As I intend to show in the present analysis, these instances of doubling point back to the Apollo-Dionysus dichotomy, and furthermore address the precarious intersection of the literary and the political. Regarding the former, Roberto González Echevarría insightfully points out the classical roots of the 'joven envejecido' in the topos of the *puer senex*, and reminds the reader that Urrutia Lacroix is particularly well versed in the classics (123), a point illustrated by the preponderance of classical allusions used to construct the narrative. While González Echevarría chooses not to delve too far into the *puer senex* motif, it certainly invites further exploration. As Daryl Sharp notes: "The shadow of the *puer* is the *senex* (Latin for "old man"), associated with the god Apollo—disciplined, controlled, responsible, rational, ordered. Conversely, the shadow of the *senex* is the *puer*, related to Dionysus—unbounded instinct, disorder, intoxication, whimsy" (110). He proceeds to describe the balance that must reign in the *puer senex* archetype: "individuation quite as often involves the need for a well-controlled person to get closer to the spontaneous, instinctual life as it does the puer's need to grow up" (110). Slethaug corroborates this dynamic, noting the conflict between the behavior-governing ego and the inner realm of shadows: “when they are not synchronized—when, for example, too much emphasis is placed upon reason and order … the necessary tension breaks down, the personality disintegrates, and a split figure develops … at this point the shadow takes over, and socially unacceptable neurotic behavior is the result” (16).

The inner struggle that takes place in Urrutia Lacroix—including the eventual dissolution of the self and Dionysian release, figuratively the “tormenta de mierda” of the final line—is precisely this conflict between the adult Urrutia Lacroix, who continually strives to maintain the appearance of moral righteousness and control, and the latent, chaotic child state that reappears in the form of the *joven envejecido* at various points to shake his complacency and question his cowardly retreat into the world of dreams. The notion is reinforced later in the same scene, when Urrutia Lacroix recounts: “Entonces me pareció ver al joven envejecido en el vano de la puerta. Pero sólo eran los nervios. Estábamos a finales de la década del cincuenta y él entonces sólo debía tener cinco años, tal vez seis, y estaba lejos del terror, de la invectiva, de la persecución” (22).[9] And in a later scene, Urrutia Lacroix describes his periodic visits to the house of María Canales, noting that during one visit he confronts a mirror image of himself as a child, yet another reincarnation of the *joven envejecido*:

> Pero cuando iba tenía los ojos abiertos y el whisky no me nublaba el entendimiento. Me fijaba … en el niño Sebastián, mi pequeño tocayo … ¿Qué te pasa, Sebastián?, le dije con una ternura que hasta entonces desconocía … De pronto sentí que los ojos se me estaban llenando de lágrimas. Entonces la empleada me lo arrebató con un gesto cargado de

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[9] Marinescu argues that the *joven envejecido* likely represents Bolaño himself, noting that since Bolaño was born in 1953, Urrutia Lacroix is thus referring to someone of exactly the same age (“Fascism and Culture” 359). She takes this overlapping of the biographical and the literary to indicate a questioning of fascist impulses on a universal level, thereby prompting self-examination.

> rudeza. Cuando volvió a subir las escaleras el niño me miró … y tuve la impresión de que esos grandes ojos veían lo que no querían ver. (128-29)

The scene is a crucial representation of the precarious binary that marks Urrutia Lacroix's visits to the house of María Canales—on the surface is the innocuous literary gathering, coexisting with brutal political torture in the basement below.[10] In the psychological conflict that plays out within Lacroix, there is likewise an Apollonian appeal to the nature of fair appearances—of 'unclouded judgment'—while underneath the surface the child-like whimsy of Dionysus tends toward the external reality of collective discord and suffering. In this scene the presence of the child Sebastián suggests a loss of innocence in the face of political violence; indeed, common to all these scenes of contact with *el joven envejecido* is the inescapable sense of conflict between the protective shield of Apollonian illusion erected by Urrutia Lacroix, and the external weight of social reality, unraveling under authoritarian repression.

There are relatively few instances in which Lacroix's narrative outwardly veers in the direction of the Dionysian, though the impulse is always felt to be close at hand. There is, for example, the aforementioned moment when he describes his poetry as becoming "dionisíaca." His description of this shift is significant: "¿Qué me habían hecho esas pobres mujeres que aparecían en mis versos? … ¿Qué me habían hecho esos pobres invertidos? Nada … ¿Por qué, entonces, aparecían esos desventurados niños enmarcados en esos paisajes corruptos? ¿Acaso alguno de esos niños era yo mismo?" (101). This moment of reflection reveals, in essence, a temporary submersion in what Nietzsche referred to as the "world-Will," a direct identification with human suffering, during which "the struggle, the agony, the destruction of appearances, all this now seems to us to be necessary" (81). It is significant, moreover, that Urrutia Lacroix acknowledges the presence of himself as a child—another manifestation of the Dionysian—huddled among these masses of people. The Apollonian side of Urrutia Lacroix's psyche, meanwhile, retains an illusory glint of rationality, appearing notably in the alter ego H. Ibacache—ostensibly a pseudonym, though there are deeper psychological and aesthetic dimensions bearing upon this identity split. We learn that Sebastián Urrutia Lacroix "planeaba una obra poética para el futuro, una obra de ambición canónica," while Ibacache, on the other hand, "leía y explicaba en voz alta sus lecturas … en un esfuerzo razonable, en un esfuerzo civilizador … como un humilde faro en la costa de la muerte" (37). The Apollonian undertones of this grandiose critical endeavor are sharply delineated, and appear as another manifestation of the tension between Dionysiac release and rational control.

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[10] Paula Aguilar points out the connotations of political complicity in these literary gatherings: "La simultaneidad de las tertulias literarias con la tortura denuncia un Chile 'de superficie' y otro 'de sótano' e indaga acerca de las complicidades silenciosas –hasta inconscientes- con el régimen militar" (134).

It becomes clear, nevertheless, that without a firm anchor in the concrete world Urrutia Lacroix is doomed to reenact the fate of Sordello. The overriding presence of the Apollonian—manifested in the dream of literary immortality and aesthetic perfection—disrupts the fragile equilibrium that must hold in the Apollo-Dionysus dialectic, and signals a critical disconnect with the fleeting, material world. Expressed differently, we are confronted with the conflict between Farewell's vision of literature as shadows, thrown into relief by his bold refutation of literary immortality, and Urrutia Lacroix's blithe optimism, firmly in line with the spirit of the Greeks he so admires. Ironically, it is Urrutia Lacroix's suppression of Dionysus that unleashes the torrent of shadows, which seems to build in crescendo and climax in the novel's final, self-destructive line: "Y después se desata la tormenta de mierda" (150). It appears to be Bolaño's maximum expression of condemnation against a literary establishment that eschews humanistic engagement with suffering and social injustice, clinging instead to fanciful, conservative notions of national literature. Indeed, it is a concern that preoccupies Bolaño in many of his works, and particularly in *Monsieur Pain*, where a literary aesthetic of unconscious visions and social detachment is juxtaposed with the vitalist undercurrents of fascism, in effect questioning the dynamic at play between literature and political reality.

IV. *Monsieur Pain*: Literature and the Mesmeric Trance

Monsieur Pain, though one of the earliest pieces of fiction written by Bolaño,[11] exhibits many of the literary and political concerns that would preoccupy him in later works. In comparison with these, *Monsieur Pain* has received relatively scant critical attention, and as a result it will be worthwhile to explore the earliest stirrings of Bolaño's brand of fiction in which the political and the personal intersect at the level of psychological fragmentation and artistic futility. As in *Nocturno de Chile*, we witness a gradual dissolution of the protagonist-narrator, Pierre Pain, whose familiarity with the occult sciences summons crucial questions concerning literature's complicity with the horrors of fascism, and, moreover, the extent to which the individual is capable of understanding or controlling the social forces that shape a fundamentally hostile modern landscape.

In broad terms, the novel is structured around the first-person narration of Pierre Pain, who is trained in occult healing techniques and is called upon to treat César Vallejo in a Paris hospital, where the poet is languishing from a mysterious illness. Pain is subsequently bribed by two Spaniards to decline to treat Vallejo,—an offer that he initially accepts—though ultimately he decides to pursue his objective. The narrative then follows Pain on a confused journey through Paris, in which he attempts to unravel the conspiracy in which he has become enmeshed.

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[11] In a preface to the novel, Bolaño dates the writing of *Monsieur Pain* back to 1981 (11).

One of the central motifs that underpin Pain's narrative is animal magnetism, or mesmerism, and there are several angles from which to approach this subtext. Merely glancing at the epigraph, an excerpt from Edgar Allan Poe's short story "Mesmeric Revelation," it becomes clear that at least part of Bolaño's interest in the subject derives from its passage between scientific and literary realms. Indeed, as Baudelaire wrote in a preface to "Mesmeric Revelation": "Animal unity, the unity of a universal fluid, the unity of matter, all these recent theories, by a strange coincidence, have somehow entered the minds of poets at the same time that they have entered the minds of scientists" (148). And Doris V. Falk elaborates further on Poe's invocation of animal magnetism in his short fiction, noting: "Within the body, magnetism is the unifying force which prevents dissolution; within the mind it is a unifying and illuminating force, comparable to "imagination" within a poem" (537). Explaining the role of the "vital fluid" in mesmerism, Falk explains:

> The portal for the entrance of the "electromagnetic fluid" … is the will or consciousness, and the more "sentient" the living being, the more open he is to its influence … In normal states of waking consciousness and health, the fluid performs its ordering function, and we are unaware of its presence. At the opposite extreme, in an unconscious state … there is still a slight permeation—a feeble current. In the middle state, that of sleep, or the "swoon," … the current flows more freely than in the wholly conscious or comatose states; the mind is partly open to the "fluid," and its presence is manifested in dreams, visions, hallucinations—untrustworthy perceptions, but hinting at the presence of an unknown inner world or mode of being. (538)

Throughout *Monsieur Pain* the undercurrent of animal magnetism hovers as a vague promise of inspiration and unity in a decidedly dark, foreboding place and time—Paris in 1938, on the cusp of World War II—and the novel plays with this tension between the potentially enlightening power of the mesmeric trance and the shadow of fascism on the horizon. Furthermore, through the obscure, dream-like visions that haunt Pain's memories, Bolaño draws an unmistakable parallel to surrealism, the political and aesthetic implications of which occupy a central thematic role in the novella.

Nevertheless, it is clear that Pain's hallucinatory nocturnal wanderings, punctuated by confusion and intoxication, point to an inner conflict that seems to frustrate any reductionist interpretation of animal magnetism. In her study *Mesmerism, Medusa and the Muse,* Anne DeLong highlights the dualistic nature of the mesmeric trance as it relates to both the pseudo-scientific 19th-century practice and its metaphoric significance in the Romantic imagination:

> Galvanism and somnambulism, two concepts related to mesmerism, illustrate two quite different aspects of the mesmeric, creative experience. Galvanism suggests the ignition of a creative spark … Conversely, somnambulism, or "sleepwalking," implies the deadening of the creative impulse and the surrender of the conscious will … although the Romantic discourse of self-possession tends to view mesmerism as somnambulant and thus to fear its silencing effects, the improvisatrice discourse of Other-possession tends to view mesmerism as galvanic and therefore embraces its inspirational potential. (81)

Thus, at least within the broad framework of Romantic literature, the mesmeric trance signified the inner, imaginative dynamic involved in creation. It is noteworthy that Pain himself describes the melding of dreams and galvanic spark in similar electromagnetic terms: "los sueños que estaba sufriendo tenían todas las características de una … transmisión radiofónica. De esta manera, como si mi mundo onírico fuera la radio de un radioaficionado agazapado en un canal ajeno, a mi mente llegaban escenas y voces … que nada tenían que ver con mis propios fantasmas aunque de manera fortuita me hubiera convertido en el receptor" (52). While it is clear that Pain's invocation of mesmerism is tied to a social rather than literary framework, he nonetheless traces an imaginative arc that places his search, and the detective narrative that circumscribes it, firmly in the context of literary inspiration. And Bolaño—by passing Pain's experiences through a mesmerist literary filter, in which he is juxtaposed with the moribund Vallejo—elicits a reading that invariably links mesmerism with poetic aesthetic. Within this somewhat unconventional detective story Pierre Pain's dreams and hallucinations, which become increasingly diffuse and incomprehensible as the narrative proceeds, hold the vague promise of otherworldly insight into the events that unfold around him. What is significant, however, is that he is unable to convert these somnambulist visions into any galvanic revelation of truth. The trance process, DeLong suggests, follows a sequential pattern in which Dionysus and Apollo play equally important roles; she notes that Nietzsche conceived of an initial state, the Dionysiac, which is "akin to spontaneous overflow," followed by the Apollonian dream state, which is "one of reflection, or recollection in tranquility" (27). It is clearly this second phase that eludes Pain throughout the novel, leaving him trapped in a Dionysiac welter of hallucination and paranoia.

V. Epistemological Uncertainty and the Labyrinth in *Monsieur Pain*

Central to this sense of incomprehensibility is the omnipresent labyrinth, an undeniably Borgesian motif that seeps into Pain's narrative, providing a subtle reminder of the futility surrounding his kafkaesque attempts to establish a connection with Vallejo. The image surfaces notably in the clinic where Vallejo is being treated, as well as inside the warehouse in which Pain becomes lost and disoriented. Upon emerging from the latter, he recalls being gripped by desperation: "El cielo de París … parecía más siniestro que nunca. Como un espejo suspendido sobre el agujero … Me sentí cansado, un pobre diablo solitario y confundido en medio de un laberinto demasiado grande para él" (106). Regarding the symbolism inherent in Borges' labyrinth, Shlomy Mualem points out: "If the world is indeed a labyrinth and not mere chaos, then there is a preliminary rational pattern to it, which is out of the reach of mankind" (137). In the context of the detective narrative this "preliminary rational pattern" embodies Pain's search for meaning, which remains distant and unattainable. His nebulous visions provide him with intimations of an overarching unity, but it is significant that he is unable to make sense of the chaos that unfolds around him; he exists in a state of oblivion that provokes criticism from his former colleague and current nemesis Aloysius Pleumeur-Bodou, who tells him: "eres tan viejo como yo y ni siquiera sabes en qué lado estás" (140).

Embedded within the conflict that develops between Pain and Pleumeur-Bodou—both trained in mesmerist techniques—is the question of how to confront an unsettling technological reality that may be used for either unifying or destructive ends. In his article on instrumental rationality in *Monsieur Pain*, Sergio Franco underscores the disruptive, polarizing representation of modern technology, a force that is potentially hostile to literary sensibility:

> A la ciencia moderna, que ve en la naturaleza a una máquina, y a la falsa promesa de emancipación y el poder destructor que acarrea la tecnología, *Monsieur Pain* opone dos concepciones holísticas de la realidad que contrapesan la fragmentación con un programa epistemológico totalizador. Me refiero al mesmerismo y al arte, representado, en este caso, por la poesía. (480)

Pain himself acknowledges the faintly liberating potential of mesmerism when he confesses: "tal vez para expresar mi rechazo a la sociedad que tan tranquila me puso en el trance de morir … me dediqué a las ciencias ocultas, es decir, me dediqué a empobrecerme sistemáticamente, de manera rigurosa, en ocasiones acaso con elegancia" (84-85). It is most likely not accidental that

Pain’s description of steady descent into poverty and obscurity mirrors Bolaño’s recurring depiction of writers whose single-minded obsessions drive them into a similar state of oblivion; and indeed, it evokes Bolaño’s own highly-mythologized literary existence, carried to extremes of devout submersion. Consequently, we find close parallels between literature and animal magnetism as possible means of comprehending and coping with the alienation of modern society. Alison Winter, examining the roots of literary fascination with animal magnetism in Victorian England, notes the perception that the occult sciences represented an attempt to make sense of a burgeoning technological reality. She writes: “However people chose to characterize and to value the “new and mighty power,” drawing them into the “new state,” the language of visions, mental forces, dreams, and somnambulism provided a medium to express it” (19). Nevertheless, Pain reveals himself to be vaguely aware of the fact that mesmerism has done no more than lead him down a dark alley of visions and hallucinations that cloud his reason, a feeling that slowly develops throughout his café conversation with Pleumeur-Bodou, in which he laments: “pude ver resumidos, en el dibujo de sus labios, todos mis años inútiles y estériles” (139). There is, indeed, a gradual recognition that the political conspiracy he seeks to unravel is controlled by forces beyond his grasp. Embedded within in this sense of frustration is Bolaño’s vision of the writer as perpetually at risk of lapsing into complicity with a framework of opposing political ideologies, ultimately realizing that neither can provide adequate answers to human suffering and isolation.

It is at this point in the novel that the backstory of Guillaume Terzeff acquires particular significance. Situated at the hazy intersection between science and political intrigue, he represents the promise of mesmerism as a potentially positive force, corrupted by the infiltration of fascist ideology. In the course of his conversation with Pleumeur-Bodou, Pain discovers not only that his adversary is currently using mesmerism to interrogate spies in the Spanish Civil War, but also that Terzeff's suicide had likely been the result of knowledge that placed him in a politically fraught position.[12] Pain's reaction reveals an atrophied faith in mesmerism as an inspirational current within the realm of scientific advancement, and, moreover, a suspicion that Pleumeur-Bodou's version of history has even further obscured his search for truth. He recalls: "había dicho la verdad, lo intuía, aunque esa verdad estuviera compuesta por sombras sobre la pared de una caverna. La versión de Terzeff hubiera sido distinta" (138-39). Pain's reference to Plato's Allegory of the Cave at this moment calls to mind Bolaño's use of the motif in *Nocturno de Chile*, where the shadow conjures the notion of an inherently corrupt reality; the emergence of nuclear technology ostensibly signals the light of reason and science, but is nevertheless subsumed into the deceptive realm of shadows masquerading as truth.[13] As such, in describing Plemeur-Bodou's version of Terzeff's history as "sombra" he implies a sense of epistemological uncertainty—Pierre is trapped within a labyrinthine set of circumstances, and receives information from different sources that is subject to manipulation and distortion, leaving him with mesmerism as the only possible medium through which to untangle the significance of his involvement in Vallejo's affairs.

In the deathbed image of Vallejo we have a poetic counterpoint to Pain's inability to channel the subconscious visions of the mesmeric trance into galvanic revelation and unity with mankind. Jean Franco, describing the "crisis of conscience" that César Vallejo[14] suffered in the

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[12] The exact circumstances of Terzeff's death are left vague, though Pleumeur-Bodou hints at Terzeff's compromising discovery of Pierre Curie's murder: "mi amigo tuvo que descubrir algo terrible que lo llevó a la destrucción" (137).

[13] The technological backdrop here has historical precedent, and alludes to political dangers faced by French nuclear scientists at the time, particularly the Joliot-Curies, whose communist sympathies made them a target of Nazi surveillance (Reyner-Canham 118).

[14] In this portion of the chapter it is necessary to distinguish between the poet César Vallejo and his fictional likeness in the novel, where he is referred to as either 'Vallejo' or 'Monsieur Vallejo,' though never by his full name.

1920s, notes that he “seems to be vacillating between contradictory urges and convictions—between a longing to anchor himself in rational certainty and a sympathy for vitalism. He often expresses a belief that, out of the chaos of the post-war years, there will emerge some ‘constructive motor force,’ able to ‘function vitally’” (*César Vallejo* 144). As evidence of an evolving aesthetic that sought to lay bare material concerns within a vitalist framework, Jean Franco cites an essay written by the poet himself, “El espíritu polémico” (1928), in which he affirms:

> El sentimiento revolucionario … prueba precisamente que la historia está siempre en una balanza, cuyos platillos siguen un mecanismo, no ya secreto, misterioso o ajeno a la voluntad humana, sino entrañado a tales o cuales apatías o esfuerzos de los hombres. La facultad de discernir los malos elementos y torcidos manejos de una sociedad o de un movimiento de la historia, concuerda, pues, con el nuevo sentimiento de la vida. (*Desde Europa* 315)

Inherent in César Vallejo’s evolving views on social progress as entirely subject to human volition is a rather clear-cut opposition to Pain’s irrational insistence on a hidden, incomprehensible design at the foundation of suffering. Digging deeper into César Vallejo’s aesthetic, Franco suggests that “art functions at the level where pre-consciousness fades into consciousness, a level at which experience takes priority over conceptualization … he gave priority to the raw material of experience which is always there, palpitating … beneath the scaffolding of abstraction” (145). Thus, César Vallejo may be seen as striking a balance between the vitalist undercurrents of mesmerism, and a rational idealism that posits a relatively optimistic, utopian vision of literature.

Taking into account this "crisis of conscience," which arguably shifted his poetry into a more consciously social, materialist direction, it is revealing to consider Pierre Pain and the fictional Vallejo as doubles, representative of divergent artistic and ideological tendencies. In contrast to César Vallejo's expanding social consciousness, Pain bemoans an abstract philosophical construct that he calls "una entelequia maligna,"[15] and insists "el mesmerismo es como una tabla medieval. Hermosa e inútil. Extemporánea. Atrapada" (89). While both Pain and César Vallejo share a vague notion that unseen, vital forces influence and unite human experience,[16] they differ significantly in the extent to which reason and social consciousness constitute a force of agency within that paradigm. It is worth mentioning that for César Vallejo this aesthetic break was closely tied to his increasing distrust of the surrealist movement, which he famously attacked in his "Autopsia del superrealismo" (1930). In it he derides "toda la pomposa teoría y el abracadabrante método" and expresses grave doubts about its ability to "afrontar los problemas vivientes de la realidad – que no dependen precisamente de las elucubraciones abstractas y metafísicas de ninguna escuela literaria" (*Desde Europa* 400). He furthermore questions the underlying "orgánico nihilismo" that initally characterized the movement: "El superrealismo se hizo entonces anarquista, forma ésta la más abstracta, mística y cerebral de la política y la que mejor se avenía con el carácter ontológico por excelencia y hasta ocultista del cenáculo" (400). Vallejo's attacks on surrealism, then, raise aesthetic questions that Bolaño explores in *Monsieur Pain* and, indeed, many of his works. These concerns center largely on the sterility of an overly cerebral literature that sidesteps engagement with the human condition; at the same time, however, César Vallejo's criticism of the movement's seeming nihilism and "abracadabrante" method calls to mind Pain's increasing doubts about mesmerism as "hermosa e inútil."[17] For Pain, there is one fleeting moment in which he feels a true sense of communion with humanity, coupled with a belief that his mesmerist techniques may potentially cure Vallejo's hiccups:

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[15] Richard Hughes approaches the relationship between entelechy and vitalist philosophy as such: "By *vitalism* I mean that assumption, ubiquitous in Aristotle's writings, springing from his concern for entelechy, that all the arts are generative. His biological studies predisposed him to see reality as the end product of form evolving into its ideally realized material structure. As there is an embryo, an evolution and finally a status in the biological kingdom, so too in the intellectual kingdom" (R. Hughes 157)

[16] Pain's use of the term "entelequia maligna" also points to the uneasy relationship between vitalist philosophy and fascism. Georges Canguilhemm examines this overlap: "Vitalism is held by its critics to be scientifically retrograde … It is also held to be politically reactionary or counter-revolutionary … The utilization of vitalist biology by Nazi ideology, the mystification that consisted in using theories of *Ganzheit* ("wholeness") to advocate against individualist, atomist, and mechanist liberalism and in favor of totalitarian forces and social forms, and the rather easy conversion of vitalist biologists to Nazism have served to confirm the accusation formulated by positivist philosophers like Philipp Frank, as well as by the Marxists" (71-72).

> Creía firmemente que mi paciente sanaría y en esa esperanza me sentí … unido no sólo a las dos mujeres que me observaban desde diferentes ángulos de aquella habitación, sino a la mayoría de los habitantes de París … Antes de irme miré al hombre postrado en la cama … En ese momento todo, engañosamente, me pareció sencillo o al menos abocado a soluciones sencillas. (64-65)

During this unifying moment Pain senses a glimmer of recognition, a notion that his circumstances are indeed penetrable by human insight. Significantly, however, this feeling is described as *engañoso*, again evoking delusion and futility. Mesmerism, just like surrealism for César Vallejo, assumes the form of an abstract, disembodied literary utopia that ultimately fails to bring transcendence or material change. Of course, Vallejo's death in obscurity raises equally valid questions concerning the relevance of his own aesthetic. Symbolically, Bolaño suggests that neither Pain nor Vallejo offers a viable antidote to the social and political nightmare looming on the horizon.

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[17] One particularly striking expression of César Vallejo's growing disenchantment with the empty academicism of surrealism may be found in the poem "El hombre pasa con un pan al hombro," which begins: "Un hombre pasa con un pan al hombro / ¿Voy a escribir, después, sobre mi doble? / Otro se sienta, ráscase, extrae un piojo de su axila, mátalo / ¿Con qué valor hablar del psicoanálisis? …" (*Obra poética* 414).

In a broad sense, the doubling found throughout *Monsieur Pain* signals this disconnect between the individual and his or her surrounding social structure, revealed through fragmentation and epistemological uncertainty. Indeed, doubling imagery abounds in the novel, from the two men dressed in black who appear to be following Pierre—described as "muy juntos, uno al lado del otro hasta parecer hermanos siameses" (24)—to his first encounter with Madame Reynaud, a close friend of Madame and Monsieur Vallejo, in the restaurant, where he sits in front of "un enorme espejo de pared desde el cual podía dominar la casi totalidad del restaurant" (17). It is also significant, later on, that Vallejo's hospital room "tenía las paredes mal encaladas y un incomprensible espejo dorado en la pared" (61). As a result, Pain's reality appears to be constructed on a series of binary connections that he seeks to understand, though their meaning ultimately eludes him. Slethaug explains that the notions of "twinship" and doubling have roots in Platonic theories on the human desire for unity, which stress the "need to move from the world of halves, material forms, and illusions to the realm of wholeness, spirituality, and perfect reality" (9). He cites, in particular, the myth of Narcissus, noting: "The early Neoplatonists saw Narcissus as an individual trapped in human form trying to reach through the mirror surface of physical reality to a primal, eternal form symbolized by the reflection in the pool" (9). This conception of the mirror image double provides a useful template for understanding both Pain's struggle to transcend a flawed reality, as well as his innate connection to Vallejo as an enlightening alternative to the constricting vitalist strain within mesmerism. It is, at the same time, difficult to overlook the presence of Pleumeur-Bodou as another double of Pain, though one with antithetical tendencies, who represents—contrary to the rational, critical position occupied by Vallejo—the barbaric appropriation of mesmerist theories by fascist governments.

VI. ‘Civilization vs. Barbarism’ Revisited: The Specter of Fascism in *Monsieur Pain*

Another way in which to analyze Bolaño’s invocation of mesmerism in *Monsieur Pain* is through the lens of this conflict between civilization and barbarism, rationality and clouded judgment. There are, indeed, several moments throughout the novel in which Bolaño juxtaposes Pain’s confused, intoxicated state with the sensation of a dark force—clearly, a premonition of the fascist plot to ensure Vallejo’s demise. At one point in particular Pain reflects, “Tal vez sea mi borrachera, pero esta noche huele a algo raro” (51), and suggests moreover that his intoxication had led him to accept the bribe from the Spaniards, an apparent effort to prevent him from treating Vallejo. This state may be seen as a variation on the hypnotic trance, not unlike the aesthetic Poe sought in his “mesmeric tales.” Doris Falk reminds us: “His work is filled with utterances from … varying states of “trance” or of abnormal consciousness in which perceptions are intensified by means of a physical condition or force, whether disease, pain, hunger, sensory deprivation (particularly a dark, gloomy environment) … or mesmerism” (544). The effects of these trance states, Falk suggests, “may range from heightened analytical powers … to madness” (544). It is from this vantage that Pain addresses the reader, an undefined condition of inebriation and altered consciousness on which he at one point reflects: “contemplé la fachada de la clínica: comprendí que sobre todas las cosas, incluso sobre la locura, allí había soledad, tal vez la forma más sutil de locura, al menos la más lúcida” (28). This is indeed one of the salient characteristics that Pain shares with Urrutia Lacroix in *Nocturno de Chile*—their first-person narrations are marked by solitude, conjuring a sense that a repressive economic and social framework represents a force of alienation and psychological disruption.

The juxtaposition of intoxication and mesmerism reaches a chaotic peak in the scene leading up to Pain's disoriented warehouse experience, a sequence of events that is shot through with undertones of sensuality and barbarism. Pain recounts, "En algún momento, todos estábamos bastante bebidos, alguien habló de ir a jugar a un garito semi-clandestino" (97). The evidently pornographic "juego de la dama y los carniceros" is described in vague detail by a porter: "creo que destripan una gallina. Hay sangre. Y a la señora le toman fotografías … Ella está desnuda y a su alrededor hay animalitos muertos" (98). The extreme violence of the scene is, in effect, a foreboding glimpse of the barbaric decadence that Bolaño so closely associates with fascism and the literature that serves as its analog. The connection is drawn in several of Bolaño's works, though one thinks, for example, of Carlos Wieder in *Estrella distante* (1996), whose group of "escritores bárbaros" transcends the literary establishment by "defecando sobre las páginas de Stendhal, sonándose los mocos con las páginas de Victor Hugo … vomitando sobre las páginas de Daudet, orinándose sobre las páginas de Lamartine … sometiendo, en fin, a los libros a un proceso de degradación que Delorme llamaba humanización" (139). The grotesque imagery Bolaño uses to depict Wieder's authoritarian literary tendencies place him firmly in the realm of Dionysian excess; regarding Wieder, Bolaño explains in an interview that he represents "el arte absoluto, en donde pueden existir muchas cosas pero no existe la presencia del 'otro' …El discurso del absoluto es un monólogo, no un diálogo. Toda medida moral, toda razón, toda consideración ética es dejada de lado. La Ilustración deja de existir y se instaura el terror" (Stolzmann 375).

Just as in *Nocturno de Chile*, Bolaño presents a strong questioning of a literary aesthetic sullied by the predominance of unconscious visions, insanity and abstract ideology over social and ethical consciousness. The aforementioned surrealist subtext, therefore, comes under attack as a movement lacking a firm anchor in the concrete world. Vallejo's criticism notwithstanding, Allen Thiher underscores some of the more troubling facets of surrealist theory as an uncompromising refutation of psychiatry and institutional rationality: "Breton and his followers … believed that psychiatry represented the very codification of the kind of insane rationality that had led to the massacres of four years of trench warfare … From Freud's perspective, Breton's call for the liberation of instinct would result, if it were possible, in an orgy of instant gratification that would destroy everything civilization is founded on" (259). Camus's criticism of surrealism follows along similar lines, as he points to the ultimately mystical, rather than socially transformative, outcomes of the movement:

> If surrealism did not change the world, it furnished it with a few strange myths which partially justified Nietzsche's announcement of the return of the Greeks. Only partly, because he was referring to unenlightened Greece, the Greece of mysteries and dark gods … just as Nietzsche's experience culminated in the acceptance of the light of day, surrealist experience culminates in the exaltation of the darkness of night, the agonized and obstinate cult of the tempest. (*The Rebel* 98)

Camus thus alludes to the presence of Dionysiac frenzy as an essential motif in surrealist art, though at the same time he acknowledges subsequent attempts on the part of Breton and the surrealists—coinciding with an embrace of Marxist principles[18]—to impart a "new morality," which he describes as fruitless: "Confronted with the horror of a period in which man, whom he wanted to magnify, has been persistently degraded in the name of certain principles that surrealism adopted, Breton felt constrained to propose … a return to traditional morality" (98).

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[18] César Vallejo describes this moral awakening in mocking terms: "los superrealistas llegaron a apercibirse de que, fuera del catecismo superrealista, había otro método revolucionario, tan 'interesante' como el que ellos proponían: me refiero al marxismo … Los superrealistas se hicieron inmediatamente comunistas" (*Desde Europa* 400).

In relation to the surrealist subtext of *Monsieur Pain*, this ambivalence surrounding the surrealist movement resonates in Bolaño's implication that the supposed utopias of mesmerism and surrealism paradoxically came to incorporate the same irrational, amoral tendencies that buttressed fascist ideology. And just as in *Nocturno de Chile,* the rift between literary aesthetic and political consciousness gives rise to the notion of complicity between the literary establishment and repressive political systems. Indeed, the journeys undertaken by both Pain and Lacroix end with similar realizations—that years have been wasted in varying forms of delusion and political evasion. On the personal level, as we have seen, their respective escape mechanisms become a means of coping with the alienation of modern society, though their failures summon an overarching vision of aesthetic crisis. While Urrutia Lacroix leans too heavily toward Apollonian transcendence and unclouded judgment, Pain veers precisely in the opposite direction, consumed by the intoxicating visions and hallucinations afforded him by mesmerist practice.

Nevertheless, it is significant that their quests for understanding culminate in moments of self-reflection, and contain within them hints of positive transformation. For Urrutia Lacroix, this possibility is thrown into relief in the final lines of *Nocturno de Chile*, in which he tells us: "Y entonces pasan a una velocidad de vértigo los rostros que admiré, los rostros que amé, odié, envidié, desprecié. Los rostros que protegí, los que ataqué, los rostros de los que defendí, los que busqué vanamente" (150). In this torrent of faces we glimpse the crumbling of Urrutia Lacroix's illusions, which gives way to an opening of his monologue to the notion of human engagement. Similarly, Pierre Pain's hermetic narrative closes with an "epilogue of voices,"—a foreshadowing of the polyphonic structure that Bolaño later employs in *Los detectives salvajes*—which contains a series of first-person and third-person accounts that trace the paths eventually followed by the characters in *Monsieur Pain*. We find in these endings the suggestion of an aesthetic that attempts to transcend the sterility of ideological binarism, offering instead an enlightening alternative that tends in the direction of open dialogue and identification with the other.

Chapter 3:
Laughter and the Aesthetics of Elevation in *Amuleto* and *El Tercer Reich*

In an interview given in 1999, shortly after the publication of his sixth novel, *Amuleto,* Roberto Bolaño describes the work, in musical terms, as “una novella menor, intimista, con una voz delirante que no ofrece contrapuntos o que ofrece pocos contrapuntos. Es una obra de cámara de un solo instrumento. Eso sí: de un solo instrumento, pero para alguien que sepa dar el callo con ese instrumento” (Braithwaite 113). There is, as I will argue in this chapter, great significance in Bolano’s choice of narrative voice, that of Auxilio Lacouture, whose frequent questioning of her own madness lends a challenging irony to her self-portrayal as “la madre de la poesía mexicana” (11). The novel is, ostensibly, a chronicle of the bohemian poetry circles of Mexico City in the late 1960s, and alludes to a world in which Bolaño himself was active during his adolescence. At the center of the novel is the military occupation of UNAM (The National Autonomous University of Mexico) leading up to the Tlatelolco massacre of 1968. Auxilio witnesses the campus invasion on September 18th of that year from the fourth floor bathroom of the UNAM Faculty of Literature and Philosophy, and her narrative is constructed through a diffracted lens of violence and political upheaval, as her time confined to the bathroom stall prompts not only a recollection of past events leading up to the occupation, but also the conjuring of visions that represent literary prophecies. While her name itself, as Andreea Marinescu has noted, signals a plea for the salvation of a culture (“Testimonio” 134), there is an inescapable sense in which her fragmented reconstruction of a poetry scene standing in defiance of external political forces ultimately veers into the familiar terrain of poetic delusion and futility. As is the case with virtually the entirety of Bolaño’s fiction, the novel is a mixture of both homage and subversive questioning. Critical consensus has typically tended toward the former, interpreting *Amuleto* as an affectionate reminiscence of a fallen generation of young poets.[19] This is certainly a valid interpretation, as the novel abounds with nostalgia for a vital Mexico City subculture that thrived on the margins of the literary establishment. More than mere nostalgia, though, Auxilio's narrative represents an attempt to grapple with what she sees in retrospect as gaping silences, perhaps best illustrated by an anecdote she tells the young poets concerning the transformative master-disciple relationship that developed between W.B. Yeats and Ezra Pound. She laments the fact that in Latin America, such an encounter between Rubén Darío and Vicente Huidobro could have proven equally transformative, had it occurred. Their reactions, as relayed by Auxilio, bear the kind of dismissive irreverence that we detect so readily in the literary criticism of Bolaño himself:

> Y entonces yo me quedaba callada y ellos seguían hablando (mal) de los poetas de México a los que les iban a dar en la madre y yo me ponía a pensar en los poetas muertos como Darío y Huidobro y en los encuentros que nunca sucedieron. La verdad es que nuestra historia está llena de encuentros que nunca sucedieron, no tuvimos a nuestro Pound ni a nuestro Yeats, tuvimos a Huidobro y a Darío. Tuvimos lo que tuvimos. (58)

Indeed, the overarching structure of the novel, centered on a first-person narrative perspective, points to the oft-recurring tension in Bolaño's works between the narcissism of the individual artist in his or her pursuit of immortality, and the potentially uplifting, communal nature of literature. One such work that springs to mind in this context is *Nocturno de Chile*, in which the delusional first-person narration of Sebastián Urrutia Lacroix, which begins as an act of justification and penitence, gradually rings out as a condemnation of the self-absorbed quest for literary glory. As suggested in my chapter on the novella, Urrutia Lacroix, too, becomes fixated on the notion of silences, and it may be argued that his downfall is constituted precisely in his prizing of dreams over action, or interiority over open dialogue. In this regard the parallels between *Nocturno* and *Amuleto* are striking—just as Urrutia Lacroix blissfully devours Greek classics in the midst of the Pinochet military junta in Chile, Auxilio becomes lost in the verse of young Mexican poet Pedro Garfías as the invasion of UNAM is unfolding. It is this sense of poetic distance, abstraction and futility that Bolaño summons in the final words of *Nocturno*, "y después se desata la tormenta de mierda" (150), which, as Bolaño once stated in an interview, "Es una metáfora a aquello que decía un poeta, 'toda una vida perdida,' a la constatación de que se ha perdido toda una vida. Cuando eso ocurre, y se sigue viviendo, lo que viene a continuación es la tormenta de mierda, el apocalipsis individual" ("Si viviera en Chile").

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[19] See, for example, Rory O'Bryen, who argues that Auxilio's narrative constitutes "an active political stance: not just a *refusal to forget* those crushed under Tlatelolco's rubble and frozen out of history, but also a resilient *fidelity* to their dreams and desires, a commitment to sing to their tune indefinitely" (479). See also Paula Aguilar, who reads *Amuleto* in part as "una carta de amor y de despedida de los ideales de los 60/70" (157).

Thus there is a sense in both novels in which complete immersion in the poetic life, while cast at times in a valiant, sacrificial light, teeters on the edge of personal ruin and political complacency. The Nietzschean ideal of the inspired Apollonian creator guided by rationality and control, a common motif throughout Bolaño's work, is often seen in the process of dissolution, giving way to a form of artistic illusion that manifests as unchecked desire and madness. There is nonetheless a desperate attempt on the part of the protagonist-narrator to defend literary values through a revisionist crafting of history that seeks to create distance between literature and politics. Andreea Marinescu, in an article on literary fascism in *Nocturno de Chile* and *Estrella distante*, notes that the writing processes of the typical Bolaño protagonist—particularly Sebastián Urrutia Lacroix and Carlos Wieder—represent "attempts at severing art from its political and historical context" ("Fascism and Culture" 356). She explains, furthermore, how Bolaño "works to reinsert their actions and discourse within their historical and political contexts," largely through "an alternative use of temporality that actively seeks to challenge both the fascist discourse based on mythical conceptions of time as well as the neoliberal discourse that sustains itself by giving the illusion of a perpetual present" (356). The writers, in these cases, assume a position of enlightened elevation and aim for transcendence of material conditions, though they invariably confront one of the fundamental struggles that plague the archetypal Bolaño protagonist—that of the narcissistic drive for literary immortality and its inherent denial of active social and political engagement. In the particular case of *Amuleto* Bolaño presents a narrative perspective that appears to create distance between literature and exterior political turmoil, much like in *Nocturno de Chile*, but ultimately grapples with how literature may engage with these conditions, acting as a redemptive agent capable of both uplifting and guiding toward understanding. In an essay entitled "Sobre la literatura, el Premio Nacional de Literatura, y los raros consuelos del oficio," Bolaño puts forth what may be his most succinct vision of this endeavor, in which he urges Chilean writers to create "algo razonable y visionario, un ejercicio de inteligencia, de aventura y de tolerancia," and poses the question, "Si la literatura no es esto más placer, ¿qué demonios es?" (*Entre paréntesis* 105). One of the more challenging questions, however, is how the writer may achieve the aforementioned balance while avoiding the pitfall of social and political oblivion.

In this chapter I will explore the ways in which Bolaño enacts this ongoing tension in *Amuleto*, placing primary emphasis on a largely overlooked motif—laughter. It appears throughout the novel alternately as an exaltation of freedom, an instrument of defiance, and a symptom of madness and alienation. The second portion of this chapter will explore a lesser-discussed Bolaño novel, *El Tercer Reich*, which offers an intriguing counterpoint to *Amuleto* in its treatment of laughter. The often sinister laughter that pervades *El Tercer Reich* must be examined through the lens of a number of philosophical approaches—namely, those of Hobbes and Baudelaire—that situate laughter in a broader context of lofty self-regard and power over others, in which it becomes an outward manifestation of sadism and the fascist denial of the other. In both *Amuleto* and *El Tercer Reich*, laughter appears as a force of either transcendence or domination of one's surroundings, though it ultimately points to the inner fragility and isolation of the individual, whose laughter echoes back as an unspoken reminder of sterile conflict and hostility. At the level of literary aesthetics, this chapter will also address how laughter serves to expose the ways in which notions of narrative elevation and control, stripped of engagement with external social and political forces, prove to be unstable constructs.

I. Nietzschean and Bakhtinian Depictions of Laughter in *Amuleto*

In the very beginning of *Amuleto* Auxilio offers the reader a somewhat cryptic warning: "Ésta será una historia de terror … Pero no lo parecerá. No lo parecerá porque soy yo la que lo cuenta. Soy yo la que habla y por eso no lo parecerá. Pero en el fondo es la historia de un crimen atroz" (11). One may wonder, initially, why such a caveat is warranted, though it becomes clear as the narrative unfolds that Auxilio's preface stems largely from notions of authorial distance, compounded by a latent sense that her credibility is undermined by madness. As I will argue in this chapter, however, another crucial element at work in *Amuleto*, which serves to neutralize the terror that she suggests lurks beyond her words, is laughter. It is woven through the fabric of the novel in a way that appears haphazard and incongruous, though a closer look reveals that it is frequently tied to notions of sadness, loss, and alienation, and that its invocation is a kind of antidote to these feelings.

In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* Nietzsche envisions a very particular kind of laughter, which John Lippitt terms "laughter of the height" (44). In sharp contrast to "laughter of the herd," which is generally directed at an isolated individual by a larger group, Lippitt argues that "laughter of the height" entails a process by which the individual learns to "laugh at all tragedies, real or imaginary." He goes on to add, "there is nothing that cannot be amusing, and the ultimate joke is life itself" (44). Paul E. Kirkland notes that, for Nietzsche, this question of the elevation of perspective is at the crux of his philosophy on laughter and the comic: "The nihilism that Nietzsche sees threatening the modern world may be overcome if there is a joyful, affirmative and elevating possibility beyond the destruction of old illusions. Nietzsche makes such a claim for laughter" (216). Along similar lines, Kathleen Higgins describes the conclusion of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* as one in which the hero approaches the threshold of spiritual mastery, "a precipice surmounted by learning from misadventure" (152). She writes: "this learning is painful, but it is embraced as well anyone can embrace what is painful can be embraced—that is, by means of laughter. It opens the possibility that one's perspective on meaning can be significantly transformed. One might come to see even folly that instigates disaster as valuable for its instructive incitement to wisdom" (152).

It is precisely this transcendent potential of laughter that Auxilio channels throughout her telling of the story. Indeed, it is significant that despite being circumscribed by the Tlatelolco Massacre of 1968, we are given very little information regarding the actual historical events. Auxilio instead addresses the reader from a highly subjective vantage, marked by a striking ambivalence in which laughter and weeping appear as equally appropriate responses to trauma:

> Ay, me da risa recordarlo. ¡Me dan ganas de llorar! ¿Estoy llorando? Yo lo vi todo y al mismo tiempo yo no vi nada … Yo soy la madre de todos los poetas y no permití (o el destino no permitió) que la pesadilla me desmontara. Las lágrimas ahora corren por mis mejillas estragadas. Yo estaba en la Facultad aquel 18 de septiembre cuando el ejército violó la autonomía y entró en el campus a detener o a matar a todo el mundo. No. En la

> universidad no hubo muchos muertos. Fue en Tlatelolco. ¡Ese nombre que quede en nuestra memoria para siempre! (27-28)

In this passage, as in others, we find Auxilio in the active process of attempting to transcend trauma through a literary re-shaping of history in which she is merely a passive observer. It is a vantage that, for Jean Franco, bears out the conclusion that political engagement through the literary medium has become an impossible ideal. She broadly questions the glorification of the literary path in Bolano's work, and dismisses Auxilio's notion of poetic sacrifice as "a romantic ideal of chivalry … or perhaps a hippy sensibility that accepts the law of chance as the only law" ("Questions" 210). Nonetheless, what Bolaño seems to explore is not necessarily the ways in which literature may become a vehicle of political resistance, but rather the ways in which it may transcend the horrors of institutional repression without falling prey to a form of nihilistic escapism.

Indeed, the subtext of the political lies at the center of *Amuleto*, and becomes the axis around which the disparate episodes of Auxilio's narrative revolve. One such episode, for example, involves a confrontation between a group of poets—Auxilio, Ernesto San Epifanio and Arturo Belano (the fictive avatar of Bolaño himself)—and "El rey de los putos" in Colonia Guerrero. The central conflict driving this episode is the captivity of homosexual poet San Epifanio, who has been bought and sold by "el Rey." We discover that San Epifanio has approached Belano for help because, as he explains to his friend: "Tú no tienes miedo … tú vienes de Chile, todo lo que el Rey me pueda hacer a mí tú lo has visto multiplicado por cien o por cien mil" (75). What Bolaño does, in effect, is superpose political strife with the battles of the literary and the everyday, hinted at in the name of El Rey's neighborhood, Colonia Guerrero. At the same time, it is clear that the metaphorical backdrop for this showdown, framed in playfully dramatic fashion, is the survival of literature itself. When asked by Belano from what, exactly, el Rey derives his power, San Epifanio responds: “En el miedo … el Rey imponía su poder mediante el miedo” (75). El rey de los putos thus becomes a localized representation of the corrupting monetary force of neoliberalism and, in this particular context, a stand-in for the buying and selling of literature as a commodity.

San Epifanio occupies a decidedly marginal social position not unlike that of the other protagonists that drift through this underground landscape, drawn into the world of prostitution evidently out of a combination of youthful naiveté and economic necessity. The heroism of Belano and Auxilio lies in their helping to deliver San Epifanio from this enslavement. At one particularly decisive moment we note an unexpected laughter that signals the pending confrontation: “Y entonces Arturito se rió y luego Ernest se rió, sus risas cristalinas semejaron pájaros polimorfos en el espacio como lleno de cenizas que era el Encrucijada Veracruzana a aquella hora, y luego Arturo se levantó y dijo vámonos a la Colonia Guerrero y Ernesto se levantó y salió junto con él” (75). Their laughter, detached from the comic, serves in essence as a battle cry, and their subsequent quest appears as both a call for liberation and a bold challenge to death. The confrontation itself, moreover, is punctuated by laughter that acts to subvert authority and assert collective agency. Auxilio tells us: “Dijo que lo único que hizo fue acostarse dos noches con él … tal vez a sabiendas de que se estaba metiendo en la cama con el rey de los putos, y sin calibrar, por ende, los peligros ‘y responsabilidades’ que tal acción contraía, pero que lo había hecho inocentemente (aunque al decir la palabra inocente Ernesto no pudo reprimir una risilla nerviosa, que acaso contradecía el adjetivo autoadjudicado), guiado sólo por el deseo y por la aventura” (82). This subtle, untimely giggle is then followed by Ernesto’s telling el Rey, “Si esto no fuera tan patétito me moriría de risa” (83). The episode as a whole is pervaded by laughter that manifests as a challenge to repressive power structures. We see this especially in the peal of laughter that bookends the poets' adventure. Having successfully emancipated Ernesto San Epifanio, Auxilio describes laughter that evokes triumph and freedom: "recuerdo la risa de Ernesto San Epifanio y la risa de Arturito Belano en el interior del taxi, una risa que los devolvía a la realidad o a lo que ellos preferían llamar realidad … y recuerdo que a cada una de mis palabras Ernesto y Arturo se echaban a reír y que yo también acabé por reírme, tanto o más que ellos, todos nos reíamos" (88). We detect in this episode strong resonance of what may be best viewed as a Bakhtinian conception of laughter; Simon Critchley describes modern literary representations in which it is seen as "an unruly force" and "a site of popular resistance to totalitarianism" ("Very Funny"). In Bakhtin we also find an emphasis on laughter's potential as a source of renewal and communion, closely tied to his vision of the carnivalesque. In *Rabelais and His World* he writes:

> Medieval laughter is not a subjective, individual and biological consciousness of the uninterrupted flow of time. It is the social consciousness of all the people … festive folk laughter presents an element of victory not only over supernatural awe, over the sacred, over death; it also means the defeat of power, of earthly kings, of the earthly upper classes, of all that oppresses and restricts. (92)

This formulation of laughter seems particularly apt for a consideration of how Bolaño approaches the notion of resistance in *Amuleto*. Literature, in this broader context, acquires a Quixotic ability to transform the futility of a marginal existence into one in which the individual plays an active, even heroic, role. When Auxilio notes that the laughter "los devolvía a la realidad o a lo que ellos preferían llamar realidad" (88), she is invoking precisely the communal, earthly power of both laughter and literature to resist oppression in its myriad forms. The connection is granted further exploration as Auxilio reflects, in the midst of Arturo Belano's confronting El Rey: "en ese momento yo pensé: está haciendo literatura, está hacienda cuento, todo es falso … Y entonces el Rey le preguntó si estaba pedernal. No, dijo Arturo, o puede que sí, pero no mucho. Y entonces el Rey le preguntó si Ernesto era su cuaderno. Y Arturo dijo que sí, lo que demostraba claramente que de pedernal nada y de literatura mucho" (85). As happens so frequently in Bolaño's work, the boundaries between life and literature are obscured, conjuring the sense that the heroism exhibited by Belano here is twofold—that in creating a fiction he is able to not only rescue his downtrodden friend, but also challenge the tyranny of "la cotidianidad" through literary creation.

Chris Andrews contends that this notion of courage has roots in a kind of passive resistance, which he argues surfaces "when characters face down violence, withstanding the fear or harm or humiliation, and when they endure long-term hardships" (xv). Andrews goes on to argue that Bolaño's "ideal of heroism combines a readiness to sacrifice oneself with what he calls a 'slow-motion luxury': a capacity to take one's time, to dilate, and distort it, whether in an actual emergency, in the face of imminent danger, or when holding on with no end in sight" (xv). There are indeed traces of this vision of resistance in Bolaño's own poetry. One poem in particular reads: "Extraña complacencia / El poeta no desea ser más que los otros / Ni riqueza ni fama ni tan sólo poesía / tal vez sea la única forma de no tener miedo / Instalarse en el miedo como quien vive dentro de la lentitud / Fantasmas que todos poseemos / Simplemente aguardando a alguien o algo sobre las ruinas" (*The Unknown University* 12). It is one of many selections that lay bare Bolaño's deep ambivalence regarding the poetic vocation. The final word in this poem, "ruinas," is a blunt acknowledgement of the poet's mortality, with the poems themselves merely ghosts testifying to the poet's earthly existence from beyond the grave. There is at the same time, however, an act of courageous confrontation with one's own fears in the poetic process, and it is precisely this confrontation that Bolaño summons in the physical altercations that emerge unexpectedly in his novels. The infectious laughter that suffuses the taxi cab at the end of the poets' clash with El Rey is clearly an outward manifestation of this banishing of fear, and is firmly in line with the life-affirming transcendence that Nietzsche saw in Zarathustra's laughter.

David Patterson draws a similar parallel between laughter and freedom from fear in his work on Bakhtin. He writes: "When laughter enters literature, it frees consciousness to pose questions rather than accept ready answers … rising from the belly, it takes us from the surface to the substance of human being" (12). He highlights, furthermore, the broad contours of Bakhtin's ideas on laughter's capacity to liberate the individual from rigid categories of belonging, noting: "The carnival images Bakhtin refers to are the images of the laughter that engenders the freedom from fear, and this opens for us the relation to the whole whereby we become whole … Central to the carnival images are the rogue, the clown, and the fool—those who, outside the context of carnival, might be declared mad" (13). Laughter, in other words, is a source of spiritual regeneration, unifying individuals at the far reaches of society. A closer look at the marginalized writers whose stories take center stage throughout *Amuleto* reveals a similar framework of laughter as resistance. Will H. Corral puts forth the idea, commonly accepted in criticism on Bolaño, that his novel's "lost and wandering souls are impotent against the intolerance of aesthetic and political debate and the frauds of polite society … he did not choose himself as the center, and opted to showcase the literary world marginalized by intransigence" (50). Felipe Ríos Baeza has commented on this facet of Bolaño's work in the specific context of *Amuleto*, which in his view engages in a "desacralización" of the literary vocation. He writes:

"Junto con otros personajes de Bolaño … Auxilio comparte la estela del fracaso monetario, la pobreza no como estigma sino como una posición favorable: esta es la primera "interrupción" que introduce Bolaño desde los márgenes: el elevado ejercicio de la literatura no es privativo del regateo por las remuneraciones" (97).

This is indeed an important observation, as it roughly parallels Bakhtin's notion of the novel as a development that leveled the authoritative distance inherent in the epic form. Concerning this decisive paradigm shift to the modern novel, Bakhtin argues: "For the first time, the subject of serious literary representation … is portrayed without any distance, on the level of contemporary reality, in a zone of direct and even crude contact … It is precisely laughter that destroys the epic, and in general destroys any hierarchical (distancing and valorized) distance" (*The Dialogic Imagination* 23). In *Amuleto* there is an analogous questioning of notions of narrative authority and distance in literature; Auxilio elevates herself from the substrata of Mexico City, where she drifts aimlessly between menial jobs and bohemian poetry gatherings, to the pedestal of authorship, where she possesses oracular powers, assuming the role of storyteller, historian and clairvoyant. Her trajectory, then, foregrounds a latent tension between the Nietzschean posture of transcendence and the Bakhtinian sense of the novel as "structured not in the distanced image of the absolute past but in the zone of direct contact with inconclusive present-day reality" (39). Auxilio's experience of the campus invasion is, significantly, a recurring point of contact, a lens through which she views the past she is recounting, the present in which she composes the narrative, and the future she claims to see in visions.

This question of elevation in *Amuleto*, it should be noted, acquires an important spatial dimension that recalls Nietzsche's "laughter of the height" in *Zarathustra*. In particular, Auxilio's description of her bathroom vantage during the police invasion of UNAM signals isolated distance, and merits close attention:

> El soldado y yo permanecimos quietos como estatuas en el baño de mujeres de la cuarta planta de la Facultad de Filosofía y Letras … escuché que se cerraba la puerta y mis piernas levantadas … volvieron a su antigua posición. El parto había concluido … Yo sabía cuál era mi deber. Así que me encaramé a la única ventana del baño y miré para afuera. Yo vi a un soldado perdido en la lejanía. Yo vi la silueta de una tanqueta o la sombra de una tanqueta, aunque después me puse a reflexionar y tal vez fuera la sombra de un árbol … Supe que tenía que resistir. Así que me senté sobre las baldosas del baño de mujeres y aproveché los últimos rayos del día para leer tres poemas más de Pedro Garfías y luego cerré el libro y cerré los ojos y me dije: Auxilio Lacouture, ciudadana del Uruguay, latinoamericana, poeta y viajera, resiste. (34-35)

She is, in effect, looking down at the invasion from above, both physically and psychologically, a vantage that is distant enough to distort the images she sees. There is also, of course, a significant temporal distance, as Auxilio recalls these images years later and re-constitutes them in writing. What leaps to the foreground, in lieu of political violence, is poetry. Bound up in the apparent absurdity of her witnessing the invasion from the women's bathroom is the real possibility of transforming lived experience through literary creation. Here, too, there is a suggestion of height and distance in Auxilio's claim of being the mother of Mexican poetry—though actively involved in the lives of the young Mexican poets, there is nonetheless a certain authorial distance that creates a sense of detached objectivity.

Marinescu usefully points out some of the broader social and political implications of this perspective, noting that the bathroom space is one of "marginalization and abjection," and argues that Bolaño seems to be positing an alternative vision of political heroism, whereby violence is confronted with compassion (“Testimonio” 144). It is clear that the compassion to which Marinescu alludes here is tied closely to Auxilio’s humorous vision, which repeatedly recasts tragedy as laughter. At one point she declares:

> Si no me volví loca fue porque siempre conservé el humor. Me reía de mis faldas, de mis pantalones cilíndricos … de mis ojos que escrutaban la noche del DF, de mis orejas rosadas que escuchaban las historias de la Universidad, los ascensos y descensos, los ninguneos, postergaciones, lambisconeos, adulaciones, méritos falsos, temblorosas camas que se desmontaban y se volvían a montar bajo el cielo estremecido del DF. (42)

Here we readily detect the familiar Baudelairean *flâneur* figure, the amateur detective scanning the horizon of the consumer metropolis—a figure that in Bolaño’s work frequently acquires heroic status. Marinescu goes on to point out that *Amuleto* deals with violence and struggle on two distinct though intertwined planes, the political and the personal, and it becomes clear that Auxilio’s heroism lies not in armed resistance but rather the active imposition of a perspectivism based on viewing unrest through the lens of the absurd. We see this transformative process at work, for example, in her description of lost teeth, casualties of the vagrant poetic life:

> la pérdida trajo consigo una nueva costumbre. A partir de entonces, cuando hablaba o cuando me reía, cubría con la palma de la mano mi boca desdentada, gesto que según supe no tardó en hacerse popular en algunos ambientes. Yo perdí mis dientes pero no perdí la discreción, la reserva, un cierto sentido de la elegancia. La emperatriz Josefina, es sabido, tenía enormes caries en la parte posterior de su dentadura y eso no le restaba un ápice de su encanto. Ella se cubría con un pañuelo o con un abanico; yo, más terrenal …

> me ponía la palma de la mano sobre los labios y me reía y hablaba libremente en las largas noches mexicanas. (36-37)

It is crucial that this acceptance of loss follows an acknowledgement that “el perderlos me hirió en lo más profundo de mi ser y esa herida ardía y era necesaria e innecesaria, era absurda” (36). The creation of perspective—tied to laughter and stoic acceptance—plays an important role in confronting the absurd and healing this wound. Auxilio subsequently distills the humanistic implications of this shift in vision, arriving at what may be taken to be the central moral argument of the novel:

> Podían decir (y reírse al decirlo): ¿cómo consigue Auxilio, aunque tenga las manos ocupadas con libros y con vasos de tequila, llevarse siempre una mano a la boca de manera por demás espontánea y natural? ¿en dónde reside el secreto de ese su juego de manos prodigioso? … El secreto reside en los nervios. En los nervios que se tensan y se alargan para alcanzar los bordes de la sociabilidad y el amor … Yo perdí mis dientes en el altar de los sacrificios humanos. (37)

It is a moral stance that is closely linked to Bolaño’s conception of literary endeavor. In this context the notion of laughter evokes literature’s ability to, if not effect material political change, then to at least uplift and transcend the boredom and horror of modern life. From an autobiographical point of view, Bolaño’s personal sacrifices, manifested as lapses of hygiene and neglect of personal health, are well-documented. Bolaño himself speaks of a “pérdida de dientes que fui dejando, como las miguitas de pan de Hansel y Gretel, en diferentes países … Incluso la pérdida de dientes para mí era una especie de homenaje a Gary Snyder, cuya vida de vagabundo zen lo había hecho descuidar su dentadura. Pero todo llega … El fin del viaje llega” (*El gaucho insufrible* 148). But there is a fundamental tension that resurfaces here: that of the all-consuming poetic life as the ultimate sacrifice, in conflict with the possibility that such a life at the margins amounts to a kind of madness, precluding any potential for active political resistance.

Chris Andrews is among critics who question the extent to which these notions of sacrifice and generosity may be taken to represent a clear summation of Bolaño’s moral leanings. More specifically, he is offering a response to Jean Franco’s question as to whether such a simple set of core values can really hold Bolaño’s corpus together. She argues, in denunciatory language, that he “often sounds like a romantic anarchist” (“Questions” 215). In Andrews’s view, he may best be understood as “an anarchist in the way that he privileges voluntary associations and spontaneous forms of solidarity over institutions” (xvi). I will argue that such seeming didacticism is always tempered by deeper concerns, namely the paradox issuing from the writer’s position as the transmitter of morals, promoting generosity and compassion, and the reality that the writer often remains detached from human engagement, lost in the vanity of individual pursuit and grandiose visions of immortality. In this particular case, consistent with Jean Franco’s observation of Bolaño’s post-political stance, Auxilio’s posture of transcendence problematizes the notion of literature as a medium of political engagement.

It will be useful here to consider how Bolaño plays with the elevation of perspective in order to question the purportedly communal, life-affirming aspects of literature that may transcend institutional repression. We have already seen how Auxilio’s position on the fourth floor of the UNAM Faculty of Philosophy and Literature affords her a birds-eye view of the sudden violence that grips the university.[20] Another important scene in the novella finds Auxilio on an ice-covered mountain that conjures images of Nietzsche’s Zarathustra and the notion of the oracle. She describes meeting the guardian angel of her dreams and delivering a series of literary prophecies: "Y luego soñaba profecías idiotas … James Joyce se reencarnará en un niño chino en el año 2124. Thomas Mann se convertirá en un farmacéutico ecuatoriano en el año 2101 … Ezra Pound desaparecerá de algunas bibliotecas en el año 2089 … César Vallejo será leído en los túneles en el año 2045. Jorge Luis Borges será leído en los túneles en el año 2045" (134). While this list of prophecies is clearly laden with ironic overtones, it nonetheless revives Bolaño's oft-recurring concerns about poetic immortality. Indeed, the foreboding prediction that even Borges' work will be relegated to an underground readership is highly consistent with the pessimism that marks some of Bolaño's essays. We repeatedly find him grappling with conflicting notions of literature as the most righteous and edifying of endeavors on one hand, and the distinct possibility that its ephemeral, pleasure-driven nature dooms it to irresponsible futility.

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[20] Auxilio also describes living in two different rooftop apartments (130-131), spaces within the novel that evoke elevated distance.

One of the salient characteristics of Auxilio's elevated state is the underlying notion of dreams, invariably summoning Apollonian semblances, insight, and self-control, delivered in the form of oracular prophecy. Douglas Burnham, recalling Zarathustra's ten years in the mountains, notes: "Elevation here partly signifies remoteness from human norms, … overcoming and growth, and of course spiritual insight … Elevation here also means the capacity to laugh, to take things lightly … Laughter signals a kind of disengagement from 'normal' affective responses or the struggle for or against" (45). In Auxilio's dream-like removal from human affairs, we find Bolaño appropriating the moral underpinnings of Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*, but ultimately subverting the clarity of poetic insight. In Auxilio's dreams, she is significantly enveloped in a dense fog, attempting to see Mexico City in the distance. At one point the guardian angel of Auxilio's dream tells her: "Esto me recuerda un cuadro de Caspar David Friedrich" (137). This observation could refer to a number of paintings by Friedrich, but two in particular stand out, the first of which being *The Wanderer Above a Sea of Fog*, which has been interpreted as "suggesting at once mastery over a landscape and the insignificance of the individual within it" (Gaddis 1). The second painting that springs to mind is *The Sea of Ice*, whose stark depiction of arctic shipwreck evokes, in Norbert Wolf's view, the cold indifference of the outside world: "Although the sea has turned to solid ice and organic nature, like the ship, is condemned to death, the light-filled sky and the boundless horizon symbolize, as so often in Friedrich's work, the chance of salvation" (74). In summoning Friedrich's paintings, Bolaño leads the reader to question the lofty aspirations of the literary path and, by extension, the journey of self-understanding undertaken by the isolated individual in the confines of a hostile society. Auxilio stands above it, as the mother of Mexican poetry, in a position of apparent mastery and insight, yet we are invariably beset by the suspicion that such mastery is merely an illusion, which has little bearing upon the real-life struggles that characterize life in the city below.

In the moment of deciding to descend the mountain, Auxilio essentially confronts this inner conflict. She tells us: "Decidí no morirme de hambre en el lavabo de mujeres. Decidí no enloquecer. Decidí no convertirme en mendiga. Decidí decir la verdad aunque me señalaran con el dedo. Comencé a descender" (142). As in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, there is a subtle juxtaposition of ascent and descent, which ultimately hints at a defining shift from the solitude of literary endeavor—associated with the Apollonian—to the embrace of humanity engaged in common struggle, or the Dionysian. We find similar imagery of elevation and descent at the end of *Amuleto*, in the oft-commented image of a mass of Latin American youth marching off into the abyss, leaving only their mysterious song behind. Auxilio positions herself in a familiar vantage as she recounts this image of artistic abandon carried to its furthest limit: "Yo me detuve en lo alto del valle y me senté en el suelo. Estaba cansada … No sabía qué iba a ser de mi vida … El sol comenzaba a ponerse mucho más allá, en otros valles singulares, tal vez más pequeños que el enorme valle que yo había encontrado. La claridad que flotaba sobre las cosas, no obstante, era suficiente. Comenzaré a bajar, pensé" (150). She later describes desperately attempting to reach out to the children in vain: "Extendí ambas manos, como si pidiera al cielo poder abrazarlos, y grité, pero mi grito se perdió en las alturas donde aún me encontraba y no llegó al valle" (153). Auxilio's elevated state signals not spiritual mastery over the concrete reality of daily life, but rather emotional distance, uncertainty and apolitical detachment.

II. Baudelaire and Mad Laughter in *Amuleto*

It is here that one detects Bolaño's skepticism regarding the poetic drive toward individuation as a viable path. At one point Auxilio hints at this pending realization, which reveals itself as a form of madness. Explaining why she is exempt from paying bar tabs, she invokes her unique poetic vision: "yo nunca o casi nunca pagaba. Yo era la que veía el pasado y las que ven el pasado nunca pagan. También veía el futuro y ésas sí que pagan un precio elevado, en ocasiones el precio es la vida o la cordura … veía el futuro desde mi caverna abolida del lavabo de mujeres de la cuarta planta y por aquella estaba pagando con la vida" (59). There is a telling juxtaposition here between the mundane obligations of concrete reality and the higher, prophetic literary calling, drawing further parallels between Auxilio's distance and Urrutia Lacroix's slowly creeping oblivion in *Nocturno de Chile*, which culminates in a shattering recognition of silence and complicity. We previously noted a similar moment of self-reflection in *Monsieur Pain*—the point at which Pierre senses the futility of his years wasted on mesmerism. An analogous realization in *Amuleto* comes at the moment in which Auxilio flushes her poetry down the toilet, a not-so-subtle suggestion of the resignation that stalks many of Bolaño protagonists, and one that casts doubt on the virtues of poetic sacrifice: "cogí el papel higiénico en donde había escrito y lo arrojé al wáter y tiré la cadena … Pensé: pese a toda mi astucia y a todos mis sacrificios, estoy perdida. Pensé: qué acto poético destruir mis escritos … Pensé: la vanidad de la escritura, la vanidad de la destrucción" (146-147). This moment of recognition is, at this point, a familiar motif in Bolaño's work. It is the moment in which the illusions that have sustained the narrative voice thus far begin to dissolve. Auxilio's descent from the icy mountain that dominates her imaginative landscape is in effect a tacit acknowledgement that the path of poetic sacrifice constitutes a lapse into madness. It is furthermore significant that the final scene, outwardly a fond reminiscence of poetic dedication, is itself shot through with the uncertainty and suspicions of madness that seep into Auxilio's recollection of her own past. She describes the mysterious song sung by the group of children marching into the abyss, pausing to consider what, exactly, is driving them: "los niños sin duda se dirigían hacia la guerra pero lo hacían recordando las actitudes teatrales y soberanas del amor. ¿Pero qué clase de amor pudieron conocer ellos? El amor de sus padres, el amor de sus perros y de sus gatos, el amor de sus juguetes, pero sobre todo el amor que se tuvieron entre ellos, el deseo y el placer" (154). Her final reflection throws into relief the sacrifices of the young poets, to be sure, but the song that echoes in her ears acquires a distinctly individualist tenor. The final words of the novel are indeed crucial to consider, as they contain within them this unresolved tension between the nobility of the introspective, adventurous poetic path and the inescapable sense that such a life is driven by vain delusion: "yo supe que por encima de todo hablaba del valor y de los espejos, del deseo y del placer. Y ese canto es nuestro amuleto" (154).

As elsewhere in Bolaño's body of work, the presence of the mirror is an unsettling image, suggesting vanity and the psychic fragmentation of the isolated individual. Foucault locates in the image of the mirror the roots of madness, noting: "The symbol of madness will henceforth be that mirror which, without reflecting anything real, will secretly offer the man who observes himself in it the dream of his own presumption" (27). Shoshanna Felman, in *Writing and Madness*, draws similar conclusions regarding a more generalized madness that is symptomatic writerly pretensions to immortality. In this context she characterizes it as "the illusion of being able to salvage something from time, the belief in the possibility of eternity, of the absolute … madness, then, is illusion as such … it is the loss of perspective, the relative mistaken for the absolute" (84). Throughout *Amuleto* the mirror comes to signal precisely this unstable illusion. One scene in particular finds Auxilio standing in front of a bathroom mirror that returns her gaze with a bewildering reflection of uncertainty:

> yo miré en el espejo … y vi a Auxilio Lacouture y lo que vi, amiguitos, produjo en mi alma sentimientos encontrados, pues por un lado me hubiera puesto a reír, pues me vi bien … y por otro lado vi mis labios, pobrecitos, que temblaban imperceptiblemente, como si dijeran no seas loca, Auxilio, qué ideas son esas que te pasan por la cabeza, vuelve a tu cuarto de azotea ahora mismo. (116)

There is a sense here in which laughter as an assertion of elevation and transcendence warps into the laughter of isolation and madness. Auxilio's retreat to the heights of imagination—and, in a physical sense, to her rooftop room—is repeatedly associated with the presumption of literary immortality, and comes at the expense of her connection to everyday life. As Baudelaire argues, there is a firmly-established link between self-delusion, laughter and madness: "it is a matter of common knowledge that all the inmates of our asylums harbor the idea of their own superiority to an inordinate degree. I have never heard of anyone mentally ill of humility. Note, moreover, that laughter is one of the most frequent and numerous symptoms of lunacy" ("Of the Essence" 146).

We return, then, to the aesthetic tension that lies at the center of *Amuleto*, as well as the other works explored in this study—the clear-sighted, enlightened Apollo in conflict with the desperate, communal free-for-all of the Dionysian, both of which appear as potential routes of resistance against political violence. So while the vagrant poetic path, punctuated by bursts of laughter that subvert and defy, ostensibly offers a creative means of transcending the violence and hostility of modern consumer society, the same distance that allows for escape simultaneously signals detachment from the worldly—closely tied to the notion that literature is powerless as an instrument of political change. Ute Berns approaches laughter's role in this precarious balance, observing that it "creates and manipulates distance: in laughing, you move away … it opens up the whole question of authenticity and mediation—on the one hand with respect to the relation between the laughing character and the world, and on the other with regard to the inner state of the laughing character" (90). In describing *Amuleto* in terms of a solo musical performance, rather than one with accompaniment, Bolaño is hinting at this notion of a perspectival vacuum, closely tied also to Auxilio's poetic madness, which is marked by an isolated and scattered consciousness.

III. Writing, Games and Laughter in *El Tercer Reich*

This image of Auxilio laughing before the mirror offers a vision that appears entirely at odds with the festive generosity of Bakhtinian laughter considered earlier in the chapter. *El Tercer Reich* finds Bolaño exploring notions of laughter that hint at an underlying madness in the laughing character, manifesting not only as a form of inflated self-regard, but additionally as a weapon of dehumanization. As I will show in the present discussion, laughter in *El Tercer Reich* assumes numerous guises, but the foremost among them is a laughter that exposes mechanisms of power and cruelty, which course through the novel in a series of metaphors linking notions of games, writing and sadism. In broad terms, the novel is structured in diary form, spanning three months in which Udo Berger, a German, is vacationing with his girlfriend Ingeborg on the Costa Brava in Spain. His diary entries, we learn, are meant to complement and enhance the professional writing he does for fanzines surrounding the war strategy board game Third Reich, a game at which he reveals himself to be a champion. Consistent with the myriad writer-narrator protagonists we have encountered thus far in Bolaño's body of work, his writing suggests a degree of distance and isolation. Indeed, there are many instances throughout *El Tercer Reich* in which Udo's self-absorbed interest in his game and his writing is dimly reflected back to him in the scornful reactions of Ingeborg and others around him. In one diary entry early in the novel, he describes a scene on the beach in which he explains to Ingeborg the intricacies of his game strategy: "Me encontraba … en un estado de exaltación producto de las provechosas horas transcurridas delante del tablero, por lo que contra mi costumbre, hice un pormenorizado relato de mi apertura, relato que Ingeborg interrumpió diciendo que nos estaban escuchando … luego comprendí que Ingeborg había sentido vergüenza de mí … de las palabras que yo decía" (45). This interaction is significant insofar as it begins to establish Udo's insularity, which repeatedly manifests as an inability to bridge the gap between self and other.

Bolaño's juxtaposition of games and writing in *El Tercer Reich* is far from casual. Indeed, the connection is made very early in the novel, when he attempts to explain the relevance of his diary in the context of his status as Third Reich champion:

> la práctica cotidiana … de consignar en un diario las ideas y los acontecimientos de cada día sirve para que un virtual autodidacta como yo aprenda a reflexionar, ejercite la memoria enfocando las imágenes con cuidado y no al desgaire … El propósito inicial, no obstante, obedece a fines mucho más prácticos: ejercitar mi prosa para que en adelante

> los giros imperfectos y una sintaxis defectuosa no desdoren los hallazgos que pueden ofrecer mis artículos. (19-20)

Here we return to a crucial motif that resurfaces frequently throughout Bolaño's work—the act of writing as a highly rational endeavor that represents an attempt to impose order on an inherently chaotic world. It is consistent with the Apollonian suggestion of poetic and intellectual insight, which runs counter to the forces of base desire and formal disorder that constitute the Dionysian drive. Thus it is a sense of control that Udo seeks in both writing and games. When asked by Ingeborg what, exactly, he finds appealing about Third Reich, he responds unequivocally: "Su claridad" (150). This response hints at a deeper irony embedded within his narrative—while structured ostensibly as a linear, chronological sequence of daily diary entries, the thoughts expressed within them reveal a remarkable degree of chaos, conflict, and incomprehension. The strategic calculation and control that he craves and finds in Third Reich is in short supply in his day-to-day interactions with those around him. His room, where the board game swells to consume the living space, acquires squalid, dungeon-like qualities, and becomes an object of disgust among hotel employees. Udo himself, late in the novel, remarks on the condition of his room: "Huele mal, a tabaco y a encierro. Al abrir las cortinas el sol me hace parpadear dolorosamente" (301). And one exchange between Udo and the maid Clarita offers a revealing glimpse of his living situation:

> Yo jamás viviría en un cuarto como éste—dijo Clarita.
>
> Yo no vivo aquí, sólo estoy de paso—aclaré.
>
> Es igual—dijo Clarita. Esto es un pozo sin fondo.
>
> Más tarde comprendí que se refería al trabajo, a que el aseo de un cuarto de hotel es algo infinito; pero entonces pensé que era una apreciación personal y me entristeció

> que hasta una adolescente se sintiera con derecho a emitir un juicio acerca de mi situación. (273-274)

There is considerable irony in Udo's assumption that Clarita has limited her comment to the tedium of housekeeping. This observation, we may safely surmise, refers not only to Berger's living quarters but more broadly to a state of moral decay brought about by his immersion in war games. His room, in a sense, evokes Plato's cave in *The Republic*, in which the darkness of shadows suggests a flawed perception of true reality. The light pouring in from the outside, viewed in this context, seems to point to the light of reason that perpetually eludes Berger.

Consistent with the formulation of the archetypal Bolaño protagonist, particularly in *Monsieur Pain* and *Nocturno de Chile*, the notion of retreat from reality is central, and closely tied to the shirking of moral obligations. Thus, in *El Tercer Reich* the seaside vacation setting alone should be readily recognized as evoking escape. And indeed, as the novel progresses Udo receives indications that he has overstayed his welcome, and should return to a more appropriately adult life in Germany. The manager of the hotel, Frau Else, conveys as much in blunt terms, asking Udo: "¿Sabes que todo el mundo se va a desengañar con tu falsa partida?" (238). Udo's own reflections, moreover, begin to probe this question of human engagement. In his diary entry on September 11,[21] he considers the possibility that he and the vacationers that surround him are "condenados a marchar en la oscuridad," and wonders if the same is true of Ingeborg, whom he describes as "protegida por el orden de una ciudad razonable y de un trabajo razonable" (235). At another moment in his diary, further accentuating the recurring contrast between the light of reason and barbaric darkness, he describes an idle day at the beach,

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[21] As Carolyn Wolfenzon points out, Udo's diary entry on September 11th is significant, as it makes specific mention of The National Day of Catalonia, but leaves out the fact that September 11th (1973) was also the day of the Pinochet coup in Chile (225). This omission is consistent with the distance that Udo attempts to maintain between his narrative and the reality of violent repression in the outside world.

"recibiendo con paciencia los rayos solares e intentando sin mucho éxito pensar clara y racionalmente" (160).

There is, as a result, a stark contrast between Udo's need for control on one hand, and his complete isolation from the social sphere on the other. It is precisely here, in one of Bolaño's earliest novels, where we find the seeds of a lingering preoccupation with fascism—not merely as a political ideology, but as a universal human tendency. Andreea Marinescu insightfully traces the contours of this vision in Bolaño's work, arguing: "Bolaño's understanding of fascism as inherent in all of us does not imply the dissolution of responsibility; on the contrary, it marks the starting point of a difficult process of self-examination" ("Fascism and Culture" 342). One of the central tenets of fascist psychology, as Marinescu points out, is a rigid system of belonging in which "the fascist subject's fear of being absorbed into the other results in defining the self in negative relationship to what is perceived as other" (346). Her analysis refers primarily to *Estrella distante* and *Nocturno de Chile*, and she ultimately arrives at the conclusion that Bolaño collapses these polarizing binaries in his novels by creating fascist protagonists who, in their "Janus-faced" configuration, partially evoke the creative conflicts of Bolaño himself, thus suggesting a "disarticulation of the unity of the self" (359). Though Marinescu chooses not to delve specifically into *El Tercer Reich*, we see a similar process at work here, whereby Udo attempts unsuccessfully to establish clearly delineated boundaries between his controlled war strategy—significantly conflated with the act of writing—and the real-life struggles that emerge around him. As Carolyn Wolfenzon points out, Udo's confusion of the structure of the game with the structure of external reality obscures the fact that the game begins to have concrete implications in the world outside his hotel. She writes: "El tablero de juego del Tercer Reich es un mapa incompleto de la realidad, que la manipula y transforma incluso antes de ser abierto para iniciar la partida. Esto a su vez es una cifra del poder que cobra la idea de ficción en Bolaño y de la influencia que otorga éste a la ética en la escritura, pues en su obra la ficción influencia y marca todo lo que vemos y hacemos" (210). It is this assumption of distant separation on the part of Udo between self and other, inside and outside, that Bolaño gradually dismantles throughout the novel, ultimately showing the open-ended, reciprocal capacity for transformation between fiction and the world into which it is released.

IV. Cruel Laughter and the Other in *El Tercer Reich*

Having sketched the oppositional framework of *El Tercer Reich*, it will now be essential to consider the role played by laughter in both establishing and deconstructing authoritative distance. Relatively early in the novel we are introduced to a character named El Quemado, a burn victim from South America who lives on the beach and rents paddle boats to tourists.[22] Though he later becomes Udo's adversary in a prolonged Third Reich match, the first descriptions we encounter firmly brand him as the mysterious other, and merit close attention: "era moreno, tenía el pelo largo y una contextura musculosa, pero lo más notable de su persona, con mucho, eran las quemaduras … que le cubrían la mayor parte de la cara, del cuello y del pecho, y que se exhibían sin embozo, oscuras y rugosas, como carne a la plancha o placas de un avión siniestrado" (34). Berger proceeds to speculate on the origins of the burns, musing: "Ahora bien, no cabía duda de que las quemaduras no eran recientes. Probablemente databan de unos cinco años atrás, incluso más a juzgar por la actitud del pobre tipo (yo no lo miraba) acostumbrado a despertar la curiosidad y el interés propio de los monstruos y de los mutilados … sufrir tales quemaduras es transformarse, convertirse en otro" (35).

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[22] El Quemado likely refers to an actual incident that occurred in Chile on July 2, 1986. Carmen Gloria Quintana and Rodrigo De Negri Rojas, photographers who were documenting a protest against the Pinochet regime, were detained by army officers, beaten and set on fire. Though both initially survived the attack, De Negri eventually died from his injuries (Kornbluh 428). While El Quemado is never explicitly identified as Chilean, Carolyn Wolfenzon points to a number of clues throughout the novel that suggest his origin (225).

Indeed, his status as exotic other is made quite explicit throughout the novel, as Udo's descriptions of him frequently evoke animal savagery. At one point, for example, he is described in simian terms: "Sus movimientos alrededor de la mesa, entrando y saliendo del lado iluminado de la habitación, se asemejan a los de un gorila. Sereno, confiado" (214). At another point in their match Udo assigns images of passivity to El Quemado, reinforcing what he sees as a bovine temperament: "el Quemado comía con lentitud de ruminante, la vista baja clavada en el suelo o en la punta de sus dedos enormes, profiriendo a intervalos regulares quejidos inaudibles" (172). As Udo proceeds to reflect on the strategic nuances of Third Reich, he notes an unwillingness and inability to understand El Quemado, instead assuming a posture of carefree disregard: "Esta reflexión hizo que el Quemado formulara una pregunta con la boca llena que no me molesté en contestar; ni siquiera la entendí" (173). The diary as a whole enacts this systematic distancing between self and other, which later deteriorates as Udo begins losing the war with El Quemado.

As we saw in *Amuleto*, one of the most pervasive motifs underscoring this distance is laughter. The appearance of Charly and Hanna, two recent acquaintances of Udo and Ingeborg from Germany, marks a decisive point at which laughter that is traditionally tied to notions of the comic acquires maniacal overtones, alternately suggesting madness and degradation. Their initial reaction to El Quemado is a striking indication of this: "Cuando Charly por fin despertó, Hanna dijo que el encargado le parecía atractivo. ¡Musculoso! Charly se rió y nos fuimos al agua" (35). At another point, in the midst of his Third Reich match with El Quemado, Udo receives a call from his friend Conrad in Germany. When asked how he is faring against his opponent, Udo summons an assortment of triumphant jabs, each one marked by incisive cruelty outwardly cloaked in a kind of uneasy humor: "Lo estoy jodiendo vivo –dijo, aunque tal vez la expresión fuera 'está mamando toda mi leche', o 'le estoy ensanchando el culo', o 'lo estoy jodiendo a él y a toda su familia', juro que no me acuerdo. Tal vez dije: lo estoy quemando. Frau Else levantó la mirada con una suavidad que jamás había visto en ninguna mujer y me sonrió. Sentí una especie de escalofrío" (204). Later in the same exchange, Conrad raises the specter of the Faustian bargain, with the implication that El Quemado represents a satanic force of which Udo should be wary:

> -Me alegro de que no hayas apostado nada.
>
> -¿Qué creías que estaba en juego? ¿Mi alma?
>
> Me reí …
>
> -El Fausto de los Juegos de Guerra –rió Conrad como un eco de mi propia risa rebotada desde Stuttgart.
>
> Sentí una cólera fría que subió desde los talones …
>
> -No tiene gracia –dije, pero Conrad no me oyó. (205)

There is a sense here in which the laughter that issues from Udo, seemingly an expression of self-assured superiority, is deflected back in Conrad's laughter, which has the immediate effect of unsettling Udo and jarring him from complacency. This is, of course, borne out by the striking irony of the situation—his steadfast assumption that the game has nothing to do with his soul is undermined by growing suspicions on the part of the reader that the game is a stand-in for bitter conflict and unreflective judgment of the other. Laughter, as we will see, is both an assertion of power, and an unspoken indication of isolation.

Such laughter is of a piece with what Hobbes considered a manifestation of "sudden glory" tied to a notion of superiority. He writes: "men laugh at mischances and indecencies, wherein there lieth no wit nor jest at all … the passion of laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others" (46). In Anca Parvulescu's reading of Hobbes, the "passions" that lurk beneath the surface of laughter are "variations on the same theme: vanity or pride or glory or *amour propre*" (*Laughter* 37). She further argues: "Laughter is a form of self-applause. In relation to an other, it often borders on cruelty" (37). In the context of *El Tercer Reich*, this is a crucial observation, as it points in the direction of the desire-driven ego in conflict with competing outside forces, and indeed appears as a visual manifestation of barbaric impulses. As Wolfenzon points out, there is an important spatial element at work that repeatedly reinforces Udo's posture of elevated distance: "No por casualidad, Udo regresa constantemente a un mismo lugar, la altura de su balcón, para mirar la playa como si fuera un tablero y él estuviera a punto de recibir allí el ataque del jugador contrario" (210-211). These adversarial impulses are embodied by a number of characters that appear throughout the novel, but most notably Charly, as well as two Spaniards named El Lobo and El Cordero. The laughter that punctuates their crude conversations is rife with sadism, as seen, for example, in a conversation relayed to Udo by Charly regarding an encounter with two lovers on the beach, which quickly transforms into a sinister joke about rape: "No me fijé en el tipo pero ella era guapa, vestida con un traje de fiesta blanco como el de Inge, allí, tirada en la playa, con el traje arrugado y todas esas cosas poéticas ... ¿Sabes qué dijo entonces el Lobo? Que hiciéramos cola. Que nos pusiéramos en cola para cuando el tipo terminara. ¡Dios mío, cómo me reí! … ¡Una violación en toda regla! Qué humor" (129).

There is, on one hand, a tone of callous indifference in the laughter Charly describes here, pointing to the intolerant underpinnings of fascism. But as Wolfenzon argues, within the metaphorical framework of the war game that threads throughout the novel what is perhaps more significant than the overt historical reference to Nazism is what remains *unspoken* in Udo's reenactment of history. She writes: "El nazismo, para los deportistas de este juego, parece la fuerza conquistadora de países y tierras –es el lado del nazismo que los nazis quieren ver-, y en eso consiste este Tercer Reich: en ganar y perder territorios sin que se hable de la muerte: los millones de desaparecidos, los campos de aniquilamiento, los asesinados en el campo de batalla, las familias desmembradas, las mujeres violadas, el ser humano degradado, no forman parte de esta guerra" (213). Indeed, the undercurrent of sexual violence that courses through the novel is referenced generally as a distant phenomenon about which Udo is unconcerned, to the point at which he fails to realize that he is likely guilty of it himself. At first, however, we find merely vague remarks from others that implicate Udo as a passive witness to rape. One diary entry, for example, describes a direct incrimination from Ingeborg regarding violence committed against Hanna, veiled in oblique allusions:

> -Todo el mundo ha tocado a Hanna –dijo de repente.
>
> -¿Qué?
>
> -Todos la han tocado. –Hizo una mueca horrible-. Porque sí. Yo no lo entiendo, Udo.
>
> -¿Qué quieres decir? ¿Que todos se han acostado con ella? ¿Y quiénes son todos? ¿El Lobo y el Cordero?
>
> …
>
> -Todos la han tocado pero tú estabas encerrado en la habitación con tu guerra. (150-151)

At issue in this exchange is the notion of shared culpability and the failure to answer the call of the other. It is a moral charge leveled at numerous Bolaño protagonists, though in particular Urrutia Lacroix from *Nocturno de Chile* springs to mind; his irresponsible retreat into the comforting, illusory realm of literature, even as authoritarian repression inflicts misery around him, constitutes his downfall. The foundation of erotic violence in *El Tercer Reich* anticipates, moreover, the questioning of unchecked lust and sadism that lie at the core of his final novel, *2666*. As Wolfenzon suggests, this violence remains largely shrouded in secrecy, though there are moments when Udo, seemingly unconsciously, implicates himself in violent behavior. We might look, for example, at the September 19th diary entry, in which Udo describes a scene he believes constitutes a brief romantic encounter with Clarita, but that without much of an imaginative leap resembles physical coercion (in a previous entry, he casually remarks, "accedió sin muchos remilgos a hacer el amor conmigo" (294)). The aftermath finds Udo slipping Clarita 3,000 pesetas and questioning her on the whereabouts of Frau Else's husband, whom he suspects of helping El Quemado win their Third Reich match:

> -¿Se morirá, Clara?
>
> -Sí… Si tú no lo matas antes…
>
> Por algún motivo cuya causa desconozco, Clarita despierta en mí instintos bestiales. Hasta ahora me he portado bien con ella, jamás le he hecho daño. Pero posee la rara facultad de hurgar, con su sola presencia, entre las imágenes dormidas de mi espíritu … ¿Cómo conjurar este poder que tan de improviso es capaz de desencadenar en mi interior? ¿Arrodillándose a la fuerza y obligándola a chuparme la verga y el culo?
>
> -Bromeas, claro.
>
> -Sí, es una broma –dice, mirando el suelo mientras una gota de sudor en perfecto equilibrio resbala hasta la punta de su nariz. (312-313)

Throughout the entire scene there is an ironic tension between what Udo chooses to reveal to the reader, and what Clarita's responses seem to reveal beyond Udo's intent—namely, strong overtones of sadism. The suggestion, raised by Udo, that Clarita is in fact joking at this moment steers the conversation further into the distant realm occupied by Udo, in which the line between cruelty and comedy is blurred. It is a juxtaposition that prompts us to revisit Baudelaire's vision of laughter—which aligns firmly with that of Hobbes considered above—as a "satanic" impulse ("Of the Essence" 148), tied inextricably to one's own sense of superiority over others.

There is also, as we have seen, an element of mad delusion in Baudelaire's formulation of laughter, a force that lies in wait for Bolaño's protagonists with each self-assured peal of laughter. "Since laughter is essentially human," Baudelaire writes, "it is essentially contradictory, that is to say it is at one and the same time a sign of infinite greatness and of infinite wretchedness, infinite wretchedness in relation to the absolute being, of whom man has an inkling, infinite greatness in relation to the beasts" (148). Laughter, in a sense, becomes a mirror that returns the gazer's own image of greatness with an image of the tragic and the grotesque.

Along these lines, there are numerous instances throughout *El Tercer Reich* in which laughing and crying appear in immediate succession as two sides of the same coin. In one entry Udo describes a scene at a local bar called El Rincón de los Andaluces, in which a girl is inexplicably crying as a group of her teenage friends watch a movie put on by the bartender: "La película era de motociclistas posnucleares … Junto a la chimenea, la muchacha se puso a llorar … Pregunté al Cordero por qué lloraba. ¿Cómo sabes que está llorando?, respondió, yo apenas le veo la cara" (104). We are presented with the possibility that the girl's crying is in fact laughter; and indeed, as Parvulescu reminds us, "laughing and crying are indistinguishable visually and often aurally" ("Kafka's Laughter" 1425). What appears to Udo as crying quickly becomes perverse laughter in response to scenes within the movie depicting particularly striking violence:

> los rostros de todos los jóvenes, excepto la que lloraba, se elevaban automáticamente hacia el televisor atraídos por el ruido de la lucha o por la música que antecedía los momentos climáticos de los combates … La muchacha de la chimenea ya no lloraba. En el televisor una especie de verdugo cava un hoyo suficientemente grande como para enterrar el cuerpo de un hombre junto con su moto. Terminada la operación los muchachos se ríen aunque la escena tiene algo intangible, más trágico que cómico. (105)

The post-apocalyptic desert landscape that forms the backdrop of the movie, littered with "los restos de una ciudad: una gasolinera en ruinas, un supermercado, un banco, un cine, un hotel," appears as an iteration of Bolaño's recurring preoccupation with the ravages of neoliberal capitalism and its attendant social framework of the isolated individual locked in bitter conflict with the other. The film, in effect, seems to enact the type of violence that *El Tercer Reich* only vaguely alludes to, and its cruelty leaps to the forefront in the laughter that rings out from the group of teenagers, a laughter that transgresses the boundaries of social acceptability. Parvulescu sheds light on this impulse, alluding to the Aristotelian vision of "animal" laughter, which "when in excess …. undoes the human" ("Kafka's Laughter" 1430). It is worth mentioning that this notion of animal laughter ties closely to what we see happening visually in the film. The bleak vision of society that the movie seems to put forth, devoid of redemption, represents precisely the form of nihilistic art Bolaño confronts repeatedly in both his fiction and nonfiction writing. At the end of the scene Udo asks El Cordero to tell him how the movie ends, and he replies: "Pues el héroe consigue salir de la zona radioactiva con el tesoro. No recuerdo si es una fórmula para hacer petróleo sintético o agua sintética o yo qué sé. Bueno, es una película como todas, ¿no?" (105). This offhand dismissal, suggesting that we are dealing with "just another movie," is an ironic nod at Bolaño's notion that art cannot be extracted from its social and political context, interpreted as a lifeless entity exerting no influence on those who view it. Indeed, it is the depiction of extreme violence that captivates and entertains the group of teenagers, while the rest is seemingly of little interest. Thus the film becomes a vehicle through which Bolaño questions the permeability of assumed barriers between art and reality.

The laughter of the enraptured teenage spectators, melding seamlessly with film depictions of barbaric violence, clearly constitutes another outward marker of psychological distance between self and other. The perceived crying of the girl standing near the fireplace, on the other hand, may be taken to signal the contrary impulse—a more inward and reflective identification with suffering. For Hobbes, this involves a sense of powerlessness that contrasts quite distinctly with his vision of laughter as an expression of superiority (Lutz 179). Berns, alluding to the theories of Helmuth Plessner, argues in a similar vein: “laughter, being closely connected to the intellect, creates a greater distance to whatever feelings may be involved than crying does. This greater emotional disengagement … may easily represent itself as superiority. Crying, on the other hand, means giving oneself up to a situation and amounts to immediate emotional involvement” (84).

Accordingly, the laughing/crying dialectic resurfaces at various moments throughout the novel as an unresolved tension between separation and reflective identification with the other. One particularly vivid illustration of this can be found in a conversation between Udo and Frau Else late in the novel, as she insists on his returning to Germany:

> -Debes marcharte a Alemania. Debes cuidar de ti, no de mí.
>
> Al declarar esto sus ojos se llenan de lágrimas.
>
> -Tú eres Alemania –digo

> Frau Else suelta una carcajada irresistible, sonora, potente, que atrae hacia nuestra mesa las miradas de todo el restaurante. Yo también opto por reír con ganas: soy un romántico incurable. Un cursi incurable, corrige ella. De acuerdo. (305)

There is a subtle power dynamic at play here, in which the empty absurdity of Udo's remark becomes the object of uncontrollable laughter from Frau Else. It is a mocking laugh that Udo describes, significantly, as "potente," and has the effect of attracting attention and asserting control over Udo, who, in response, "opts" to laugh in an apparent gesture toward saving face. Indeed, her retort, "un cursi incurable," throws into relief the self-imposed artifice of Udo's laughter. There is a strikingly similar moment earlier in the novel, when Udo's clichéd romanticizing of Frau Else's beauty provokes a laugh of ridicule:

> Yo no me refería sólo a su belleza física, a todas luces obvia, sino a su… halo; la atmósfera que emana de sus actos más nimios… Sus silencios…
>
> Frau Else se rió, esta vez de forma abierta, como si acabara de escuchar un chiste.
>
> -Perdóneme –dijo-. No es de usted de quien me río.
>
> -De mí no, de mis palabras –dije, riendo también, en manera alguna ofendido. (Aunque la verdad es que sí estaba un poco ofendido.) (89)

In these laughs we see traces of fragility in Udo's rigid system of belonging and difference based on outward physical appearance. The notion of the false laugh, as an act of willful assertion, surfaces at another moment in which Conrad suggests that Udo's pending loss to El Quemado is an indication of instability in his life: "Conrad tenía razón, no al insistir en que regresara sino al pintar mi situación como producto de un desarreglo nervioso … Estoy perdiendo, es verdad, pero sin abandonar mi juego limpio. A modo de ejemplo solté varias carcajadas. (Alemania, según Conrad, perdió con fairplay; la prueba es que no usó gases tóxicos ni siquiera contra los rusos, ja ja ja.)" (298). And Udo's meeting with Frau Else's bedridden husband late in the novel prompts a similar manipulation of laughter as a last-ditch defense mechanism: "Eso no es ningún deporte. Y por supuesto tampoco estoy hablando del Tercer Reich sino de los proyectos que ese pobre muchacho prepara para usted. ¡No en el juego … sino en la vida real! Me encogí de hombros, no estaba dispuesto a llevarle la contraria a un enfermo. Mi incredulidad la expresé soltando una risa amistosa; después de eso me sentí mejor" (321-322). This appearance of the false laugh is consistent with Udo's pretense of control and steadfast avoidance of personal reflection throughout the novel; we repeatedly find him in positions of relative intimacy with others, though these situations are permeated by an underlying dynamic of control, and are ultimately subverted by the categorical distancing of laughter.

It is significant, moreover, that when El Quemado has finally defeated Udo in Third Reich, his response entails a mixture of physical violence and laughter: "La mano del Quemado asió mi cuello y tiró hacia arriba. Di un par de manotazos, del todo inútiles, e intenté patearlo, pero mis miembros habían adquirido la consistencia de la lana. Aunque no creo que el Quemado me escuchara murmuré que yo no era nazi, que yo no tenía ninguna culpa" (346-347). And subsequently, "Abrí los ojos cuando me sentí encallar en la arena, a pocos centímetros de una lámpara de camping gas. No tardé en comprender, mientras me revolvía como un gusano, que estaba solo y que nunca hubo nadie junto a la lámpara … Afuera, caminando en círculos alrededor de la fortaleza, el Quemado se reía" (347). This is the first time in the novel that we see El Quemado laughing, and it quite clearly indicates a reversal of power whereby Udo has been made the other. The scene also marks a crucial moment in which the violence that had previously been merely hinted at through Udo's writing and war games, confined to the boundaries of the hotel room, erupts into the public sphere, further signaling the notion of art as a kind of vector of barbaric contagion.

Nevertheless, as Wolfenzon points out, this game of Third Reich is one in which there is ultimately no winner. She argues that while Udo and El Quemado represent oppositional political ideologies—fascism and communism, respectively—they also happen to share considerable common ground in their daily lives, and their individual struggles are in effect equalized in a haze of violence: "Toda esta violencia y esta similitud entre uno y otro cobra aún mayor fuerza cuando el Quemado lo vence y se sugiere que sus quemaduras fueron producto de 'los nuevos alemanes o el nazismo chileno' … la partida violenta entre el Quemado y Udo nos está demostrando que estas ideologías radicales sólo conducen a la muerte" (225). It is a realization that we glimpse at one point in the course of the Third Reich match, when at the end of a session Udo senses that the horrified gaze of an onlooker might be directed not at El Quemado but at him:

> La partida transcurrió como entre brumas. Cuando salimos de la habitación, en el pasillo, encontramos a una camarera que al vernos ahogó un grito y echó a correr. Miré al Quemado, incapaz de decir nada; una sensación de vergüenza ajena me escoció hasta que subimos al ascensor. Entonces pensé que acaso el susto de la camarera no fuera provocado por el rostro del Quemado. La sospecha de estar pisando en falso se hizo más aguda. (190)

It is here where the outward markers of distinction that Udo had previously employed as a distancing mechanism are suddenly blurred and cease to hold meaning. Indeed, the scene represents a rare moment of reflection in which he escapes the vacuum of selfhood to see himself as the other and, in the process, glimpses his own wretchedness.

Udo foregrounds this newfound notion of the futility of conflict in one of his final diary entries, entitled “Von Seeckt.” Recalling a conversation with Conrad after having returned to Germany, he writes:

> le dije a Conrad que bien pensado y en resumidas cuentas todos nosotros éramos como fantasmas que pertenecían a un Estado Mayor fantasma ejercitándose continuamente sobre tableros de *wargames*. Las maniobras a escala. ¿Te acuerdas de Von Seeckt? Parecemos sus oficiales, burladores de la legalidad, sombras que juegan con sombras … Me reí con ganas: somos la basura de Von Seeckt pero nos queremos, ¿verdad? Al cabo, Conrad también se rió, aunque tristemente. (356)

Here Udo reverts to the image of the Platonic shadow, evidently realizing that his Third Reich match with El Quemado was little more than a prolonged distraction from everyday life, representing not active engagement with others but merely an unstable simulacrum. In this regard, it acquires the empty self-righteousness that Bolaño elsewhere associates with unchecked literary ambition. This is, indeed, a significant moment within the novel, insofar as it finds Udo in the process of active introspection. As such, his final laugh is not one of self-congratulation but rather aligns with the Nietzschean conception of laughter previously considered in the context of *Amuleto*. It is a laugh that affirms the search for understanding in the face of absurdity and misfortune, and Conrad’s sad laugh in response to Udo’s appears as a faint echo of the violence that had previously permeated Costa Brava.

Laughter, then, occupies rather indeterminate terrain throughout *El Tercer Reich*. Absent here is the Bakhtinian notion of laughter as collective subversion that floats hopefully as a potential avenue of resistance in *Amuleto*. In its place is a form of laughter that exposes Udo’s posture of elevated separation, not only in his human interactions, but also in his narrative structure as one of exclusion and isolation, in which the sociopolitical context is assumed distinct from the innocuous story he is narrating about his vacation in diary form. At a more immediate social level, we saw how laughter becomes an instrument of power and dehumanization of the other; its appearance throughout the novel is almost always tied to notions of superiority that manifest as callous indifference. But beyond Bolaño's moral qualms with the sense of Dionysian frenzy inherent in this barbaric outlook, laughter serves a fundamental aesthetic purpose as well. On the fictional plane, laughter is a mechanism that foregrounds Udo's pretension to elevated distance in his narration, which he closely associates with Apollonian rationality and control. The laughter that he summons is a self-assured projection of narrative authority, part of which entails a confidence that his story constitutes a closed circuit that cannot be permeated, or have any impact in the concrete reality of the present. The laughter that echoes back to the laughing character—and in some cases, the weeping that lies beneath this laughter—constitutes a challenge to the notion of distanced authority, thus effecting an opening of the narrative to human dialogue. In a more general sense, then, laughter also exposes an aesthetic binary of oppositional ideologies, in which fiction, by "choosing sides," risks perpetuating a logic of difference and separation that leads nowhere.

It is here that *Amuleto*'s treatment of laughter appears as a potential antidote. Auxilio holds aloft the notion of Nietzschean laughter as an elevation of perspective that neutralizes the polarity of political struggle, and offers a means of transcending an otherwise marginal existence through literary creation. This sense of overcoming is also embodied conversely in the Bakhtinian depiction of carnival laughter, which presents an uplifting vision of the collective generosity of literature. We are left, nonetheless, with the unavoidable sense that this represents a tenuous form of resistance. It serves to insulate Auxilio from horror and tragedy, but it is precisely this insulation, and the accompanying assumption that the writer can somehow remain outside of politics, that pulls her away from active engagement into the heights of poetic creation. Much like the mysterious song that continues to echo even after the children have descended into the abyss, Auxilio’s laughter rings out as a persistent questioning of literary values in a divided world.

Chapter 4:
Illness, Desire and Dissolution in *2666*

Up to this point I have addressed numerous manifestations of the Apollo-Dionysus dialectic throughout Bolaño's body of work. There has been, however, one glaring omission, which I seek to examine in the present chapter—Bolaño's treatment of eroticism within the context of Dionysian frenzy and the connection that this has with literary creation. Frances Oppel, in her study on gender in the works of Nietzsche, notes: "The sexual analogy in *The Birth of Tragedy* grounds the practice of art, as artist or spectator, in that physical force, and demonstrates the close connection between art and sexuality. The Dionysian, with its orgies, its satyrs, and its orgiastic flute tones, is sexual, and its sexuality overflows the boundaries of such concepts as 'man' and 'woman'" (87). Within the overarching framework of Bolaño's aesthetic, the topic has received relatively little critical attention. Among the criticism that deals with this theme, Alexis Candia's work on the intersection of violence and eroticism stands out. His argument hinges on the idea that sexual transgression represents a form of escape from the superficial world of capitalist excess: "Ante una sociedad dominada por la necesidad creciente de aumentar la producción de bienes y servicios, donde impera la determinación de maximizar el rendimiento del cuerpo, Bolaño apela a una actividad, el erotismo, que se sitúa al margen de la lógica economicista … y que apunta a generar … un sentimiento de autonomía y libertad corporal en hombres y mujeres" (114). Central to Candia's thesis is the inextricable link between eroticism and violence, which he describes as "sellos de un rito que tiende hacia el exceso y el quiebre de los cánones morales y culturales de la sociedad occidental"; he goes on to interpret the dynamic as "una liberación y … una revolución frente a las convenciones que rigen la forma de vivir y disfrutar el sexo en sociedades influenciadas por ingentes aparatos de poder y control ético cultural" (114). I will argue that, while such a link does indeed appear to exist in Bolaño's work, it nevertheless suggests a vision of erotic abandon that is far from the transcendent, liberating force Candia delineates. Rather, it is clear, especially throughout *2666*, that sexual desire more often constitutes a gaping abyss that opens before Bolaño's protagonists, rendering them incapable of rational control. It is a drive, moreover, that is repeatedly shown to be subject to, and indeed fully intertwined with, the economic forces of neoliberalism.

Broadly speaking, it can be safely stated that the erotic subtext of Bolaño's work is detached from more traditional notions of love and fulfilment. The Catalan writer Ponç Puigdevall, responding in an interview to the question of central themes for Bolaño, frames the issue in blunt terms: "The main one [theme] is literature. The characters are writers or people linked in some way to writing. There's violence, and there's sex. The women in his novels are very interesting. Love isn't one of his themes" (Maristain 242). And Brett Levinson echoes this observation, noting: "Bolaño belongs to a tradition of writers for whom art pertains to the nonproductive, nonexchangeable realm, a domain of excess now perhaps lost. Hence, Bolaño frequently returns to, and links inextricably, three activities: writing, sex, and killing" (160). This chapter will explore the Sadean underpinnings of Levinson's assertion, though I will argue that any seeming exaltation of literary abandon in Bolaño is always tempered, from an ethical standpoint, by a Borgesian restraint that serves to push literature back in the direction of intellectual control and humanistic engagement.

This conflicting dynamic surfaces, notably, in the previously-discussed essay "Literatura + enfermedad = enfermedad," where Bolaño searches for deeper meaning behind erotic and creative impulses. The point of departure is Baudelaire's "Le voyage," from which Bolaño extracts:

> Este último verso, al fondo de lo ignoto, para encontrar lo nuevo, es la pobre bandera del arte que se opone al horror que se suma al horror, sin cambios sustanciales … algo que, sin duda, sabía Rimbaud, que se sumergió con idéntico fervor en los libros, en el sexo y en los viajes, sólo para descubrir y comprender … que escribir no tiene la más mínima importancia (escribir, obviamente, es el mismo que leer, y en ciertos momentos se parece bastante a viajar, e incluso, en ocasiones privilegiadas, también se parece al acto de follar, y todo ello, nos dice Rimbaud, es un espejismo …). (154-155)

This apparent pessimism notwithstanding, Bolaño—following a critical interpretation of Mallarmé's poem "Brise marine," in which the poet laments "la carne es triste"—comes to the resignedly half-optimistic conclusion that "los libros son finitos, los encuentros sexuales son finitos, pero el deseo de leer y follar es infinito, sobrepasa nuestra propia muerte … lo único que resta por hacer es viajar" (146). And arguably the strongest questioning of erotic and literary transcendence appears in the sub-section within that same essay, "Enfermedad y Dioniso," which begins: "Aunque la verdad de la verdad, la purita verdad, es que me cuesta mucho admitirlo. Esa explosión seminal, esos cúmulos y cirros que cubren nuestra geografía imaginaria, terminan por entristecer a cualquiera" (140-141). It should be noted, however, that this essay, like *2666*, was composed by Bolaño during his final years, with the consciousness that death from liver failure was near—a time that, if these writings provide any meaningful indication, was marked by profound feelings of desperation and futility.

In this chapter I will address the numerous manifestations of desire—erotic and otherwise—throughout *2666*, along with its Dionysian underpinnings, which repeatedly place Bolaño's drifting protagonists on the precipice of collapse. The principal focal points will be "La parte de los críticos," "La parte de Amalfitano," and "La parte de Archimboldi," though a tangential consideration of the numbing brutality that spills into “La parte de los crímenes” will be essential as well. Along these lines, I will delve into the subtext of Sadean transgression that ultimately informs Bolaño’s vision of an overarching fusion of writing, violence and eroticism. These three omnipresent themes propel the protagonists into the archetypal Bolaño journey—informed by the aforementioned Baudelairean notion of the term, which lends the novel its epigraph[23]—that leads into an abyss of frustration and death. Figuratively this is the Mexican city Santa Teresa, a fictional stand-in for Ciudad Juárez, which Bolaño once described in an interview as the closest approximation to hell, “el espejo desasosegado de nuestras frustraciones y de nuestra infame interpretación de la libertad y de nuestros deseos” (*Entre paréntesis* 339).

I. Medusa, Mirrors, and Melancholy in “La parte de los críticos”

Relatively early in *2666*, in “La parte de los críticos,” we get a glimpse of Bolaño’s pervasive intertwining of the literary and the erotic, developed through the triangular liaison that unravels between Liz Norton, Jean-Claude Pelletier, and Manuel Espinoza, three of the literary critics in search of the elusive and enigmatic writer Benno Von Archimboldi. At one particularly revealing moment, it is suggested that the respective reading lists of each of Norton’s suitors bears directly on his sexual prowess: “Pelletier tenía más bibliografía que Espinoza, quien había leído por primera vez al marqués de Sade sólo para contrastar (y rebatir) un artículo de Pohl … Pelletier, en cambio, había leído al divino marqués a los dieciséis años y a los dieciocho había hecho un *ménage à trois* con dos compañeras de universidad” (66). Noteworthy here, aside from the playful irony inherent in the notion of a sexual bibliography, is the element of excess that marks this description, in which eroticism is emptied of emotion and filled instead with sterile, self-serving academicism. At the same time, the reference to the Marquis de Sade, with its clear-cut implications of sexual violence, situates the erotic misadventures of Espinoza and Pelletier in a context of unchecked lust and domination.

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[23] “Un oasis de horror en medio de un desierto de aburrimiento,” taken from a translation of Baudelaire’s poem “Le voyage.”

This alignment of eroticism with aggression has been noted by several critics, among them John Lingan, who, in his review of *2666*, writes: “Sex is an altercation … and orgasms are always full of pressure release but never emotional catharsis” (“Damning Bolaño”). Indeed, it is certainly not coincidental that many of the scenes throughout *2666* that carry an erotic charge are also suffused with violence, and vice versa. At one moment, in a scene rife with Sadean undertones, Pelletier and Espinoza inexplicably unleash a near-fatal beating on a bewildered taxi driver, the violence of which becomes transfigured into sexual release: “permanecieron unos segundos sumidos en la quietud más extraña de sus vidas. Era como si, por fin, hubiera hecho el *ménage à trois* con el que tanto había fantaseado … Norton, que los miraba sin verlos en la oscuridad, parecía haber experimentado un orgasmo múltiple” (103). Later, the scene provokes a moment of confused reflection in Espinoza and Pelletier: “Hablaron de la sensación que ambos sintieron mientras golpeaban el cuerpo caído. Una mezcla de sueño y deseo sexual. ¿Deseo de follar a aquel pobre desgraciado? ¡En modo alguno! Más bien, como si estuvieran follando a sí mismos … en una especie de sueño, escarbaban y escarbaban … ¿Qué buscaban? No lo sabían” (105). The scene as a whole may be taken to encapsulate Bolaño’s vision of sex and violence as a kind of inner search for subjectivity, much in the way that writing assumes the form of self-probing for the author. Here the broader notion of the literary critic acquires metaphorical significance; the search undertaken by the critics initially resembles a detective plot, with Archimboldi’s literary legacy and whereabouts at the heart of the mystery. As the novel unfolds, however, this search becomes a desperate attempt to understand the primitive, violent urges that lurk in the unconscious. For Bolaño, as we have seen in previous chapters of this study, the act of writing lies at the crux of these irrational, Dionysian impulses, hinting ominously at the precariousness of erotic and literary abandon.

In symbolic terms, Norton comes to embody this danger, brought initially to the surface in the form of a cryptic warning issued by her lover Alex Pritchard, whom Pelletier and Espinoza regard with competitive suspicion. Pritchard tells Pelletier: "Ten cuidado … De la Medusa … cuando la tengas en las manos te va a explotar" (96-97). Pelletier subsequently reaches the conclusion that "Pritchard me pone, nos pone, en guardia contra un peligro que nosotros no vemos. O bien que Pritchard quiso decirme que sólo tras la muerte de Norton yo encontraré, nosotros encontraremos, el amor verdadero … ¿es que no lo ves? Pritchard se ve a sí mismo como Perseo, el asesino de Medusa" (97-98). To be sure, Pelletier's interpretation of Pritchard's warning reads as plausible, if vaguely naive, though the image remains elusive, and contains within it allusions that extend beyond the erotic realm. Indeed, it should be noted that the Medusa is a fundamental motif that threads throughout the entire novel. David Leeming, in his book-length study of the myth, describes some of its philosophical and psychoanalytical dimensions:

> For Jung the Medusa in us all is the sometimes chaotic element which has the potential for creativity and destruction. Others might have referred to this aspect as the Dionysian side of the personality. To avoid destruction—in psychological terms, extreme psychosis or schizophrenia—we must follow the example of Perseus, who looked at Medusa only in reflection, reflection here encompassing the idea of mental reflection, a practice more Apollonian than Dionysian. (59-60)

In this vein, he proceeds to point out the Nietzschean interpretation of the Medusa head in *The Birth of Tragedy,* in which it is "a symbol of the Apollonian struggle against Dionysianism: 'the figure of Apollo, rising full of pride, held out the Gorgon's head to this grotesquely uncouth Dionysian power'" (57).

While Pelletier's academic analysis of Pritchard's warning compellingly suggests that Liz Norton is in fact Medusa, his hypothesis that Pritchard sees himself as Perseus hints at a deeper irony. A closer look at the dynamic between Pelletier, Espinoza, Norton and their Italian colleague Piero Morini reveals a different frame of representation, wherein the true Perseus figure, arguably, is Morini. Throughout the novel he acts as a mediating presence amidst the uncontrolled sexual impulses of Pelletier and Espinoza, both of whom succumb to the seemingly irresistible charms of Norton, in addition to indulging in a series of nocturnal escapades with prostitutes. Morini's reflective role is further sketched out in a nightmare he has, in which an ordinary hotel pool opens up into an expansive, bottomless abyss, from which an apparition resembling Liz Norton surfaces. The scene, which abounds with images of eroticism and death, merits close analysis—indeed, the narrator notes that Morini himself had interpreted the dream in "al menos cuatro maneras diferentes" (70), a passing observation that subtly beckons the reader to engage in similar interpretive work. It is important, first of all, to note the presence of Espinoza and Pelletier in the dream; they are sitting at a table on the patio playing cards, with their backs to the pool, in an oblivious state. The element of competition is made clear, but so too are notions of gambling and unseen danger. Then, of course, we are presented with ominous water imagery, which seems to simultaneously evoke shipwreck and latent sexuality: "El agua en la piscina parecía que trepaba por los bordes, como si en alguna parte se estuviera gestando una borrasca o algo peor" (68). Perhaps the most significant feature of Morini's nightmare, however, is the confrontation with Norton, in which he innately senses a need to avert his gaze and approach with caution: "el ser maligno deseaba que Morini se volviera y viera su rostro …

retrocedió y siguió bordeando la piscina, procurando no mirar a quien lo seguía … En medio de la niebla apareció entonces el rostro de Liz Norton. Una Norton más joven … que lo miraba con una fijeza y seriedad que obligaban a Morini a desviar la mirada" (69). It is here that Morini's role as a Perseus figure become clear. Liz Norton, as Medusa, exerts her power entirely through the eyes; according to Leeming, this gaze is tantamount to "the 'unspeakable horror of death,' which, when projected onto the viewer, in effect, petrifies him" (65). While the dream does not culminate in a literal beheading of the Medusa, there is nevertheless a sense in which her powers have been neutralized, as if through reflection; upon receiving a telepathic warning from Norton, Morini concludes, "No es mala, es buena" (70).

Indeed, the relationship between Norton and Morini is circumscribed by a continuous play of averted gazes, which resurfaces in a nightmare related by Norton toward the end of the first part of the novel. In an email to Espinoza and Pelletier she describes waking up in the middle of the night and seeing Morini's empty wheelchair in the hallway, with the shadow of Morini nearby, his back facing her. She later describes this dream to Morini:

> -La silla de ruedas me miraba, y tú, que estabas de pie, tan tranquilo, no me mirabas. ¿Lo entiendes? …
>
> -Creo que sí … mi silla te vigilaba mientras yo te ignoraba, ¿no? Como si la silla y yo fuéramos una sola persona o un solo ente. Y la silla era mala, precisamente porque te miraba, y yo también era malo, porque te había mentido y no te miraba. (203)

In Norton's nightmare we are presented with an analog of Morini's nightmare earlier in the chapter. Morini, again, averts his gaze, and Norton is faced instead with an image—the wheelchair—of overwhelming helplessness and mortality. In the relationship between Morini and Norton, which significantly blossoms into non-sexual love, the mirror becomes a symbol of the struggles of each to define their own subjectivity and regulate erotic desire. Bolaño himself alludes to this conflict in an essay entitled “Consejos sobre el arte de escribir cuentos,” where he cautions against the temptation to write two stories at a time, arguing that it carries within it “el juego más bien pegajoso de los espejos amantes: una doble imagen que produce melancolía” (*Entre paréntesis* 324). Shadi Barstsch explains the phenomenon in the context of the Narcissus myth, where “the reflection in which you see and love yourself is a closed circle in which subject and object mirror each other and are literally collapsed into each other” (92), further noting, “the story seems a parable for how we remake the other according to the dictates of our desire …this mirrored doubling is of no use to Narcissus; in this case, the splitting of the self into viewer and viewed is not salutary … Both Medusa’s mirror and Narcissus’ have the same effect: paralysis and death” (93). And Claire Nouvet reminds us that, from a broader vantage, the story of Echo and Narcissus “presents itself as a narrative about responsibility … the duty of responding to the call of the other” (104). She subsequently takes up the Narcissus myth from the standpoint of the precarious quest for subjectivity, arguing that it speaks of a “literal and deadly self-knowledge: to recognize the self as a simulacrum, that is, as something other than the self, as precisely not a self but a figure. To acknowledge, in other words, the fragility of the human figure which can always be shown to be a mere figure” (128).

It is precisely through this tension between subjectivity and unchecked desire that we must approach the ubiquity of the mirror and the gaze in *2666*. Indeed, the question of self-recognition lies at the crux of Morini’s quest to find both Archimboldi and the English painter Edwin Johns. Toward the end of the first part, following Morini’s departure from Santa Teresa, we note an enigmatic shift in his perception of self: “Morini … ya había iniciado un viaje, un viaje que no era alrededor del sepulcro de un valiente sino alrededor de una resignación … un estado de mansedumbre, una humildad exquisita e incomprensible que lo hacía llorar sin que viniera a cuento y en donde su propia imagen, lo que Morini percibía de Morini, se iba diluyendo de forma gradual e incontenible" (145). This voyage, in effect, may be seen in terms of a transformation, in which he gradually loses his self-control, focus and individuality; the academic pursuits that had sustained him are revealed to be illusory, unstable obsessions, and he is consumed by melancholic despair.

Liz Norton, too, undergoes a similar process of psychic fragmentation prior to her union with Morini at the end of the first book. Early in the novel she is portrayed significantly in melancholic terms, suggesting a kind of resignation similar to that experienced by Morini: "Antes de que Norton se acostara por primera vez con Pelletier Morini ya había entrevisto esa posibilidad. No por la forma en que Pelletier se comportaba delante de Norton sino por el desasimiento de ésta, un desasimiento impreciso, que Baudelaire habría llamado spleen y que Nerval habría llamado melancolía, y que colocaba a la inglesa en una disposición excelente para comenzar una relación íntima con quien fuera" (63). Both instances of melancholy hint at an underlying need to mend the fragmentation of the self, reinforced by the omnipresence of mirrors and repeated emphasis on the gaze of the other. Max Pensky, addressing the modern conception of Baudelairean spleen, notes the deeper existential resonance of the concept, viewed through the lens of commodity capitalism: "Baudelaire's heroism and his specifically modern form of melancholia are explained by this fact: the commodification of the social world … leaves no sanctuary for subjectivity" (170). He proceeds, furthermore, to describe the psychological contours of the modern melancholic condition:

> The 'sadness' of baroque melancholy is, in modernity, replaced by an emotional complex consisting of various permutations … of profound fear and rage: primal emotions, in

> keeping with the power of the commodity to awaken prehistoric, savage modes of existence. Spleen is characterized … as 'naked horror'; that is, the primitive, infantile fear of being swallowed up by the mass of objects, the fear of flying to pieces, disappearance in the diffraction and multiplication of selfhood. (171)

Given Bolaño's recurring preoccupation with the destabilizing influence of neoliberal policy, Pensky's comments provide particular insight into the psychological implications of boundless freedom and desire, unchecked by reason. Morini's lapse into melancholy is foreshadowed in a scene in which he wakes up blind after spending an evening on his balcony staring at a sign that seems to metaphorically mirror his condition: "La urbanización (aún no construida) ostentaba el nombre de Residencias Apolo y la noche anterior Morini había estado observando el anuncio desde el balcón, con un vaso de whisky en la mano, mientras se encendía y se apagaba" (55). The sudden transformation conjures, on one hand, the myth of Tiresias, whose blindness is punishment for "the overstepping of sexual boundaries" (Bartsch 92).[24] In a more general sense, though, his blindness suggests a fracturing of self-recognition, coupled with an increasing sense that his quest to find Archimboldi is a futile, misguided enterprise. What we see, then, is a subversion of the traditional hero's quest, a motif that for Bolaño frequently devolves into the ill-fated voyage of Baudelaire's modern traveler. While Morini bears traces of Perseus, who, as Leeming notes, represents "the drive of the individual for self-realization or individuation" (103), he is nonetheless seen as perpetually teetering on the edge of an abyss. Much like for Urrutia Lacroix in *Nocturno de Chile*, the voyage appears tantalizingly as an agent of healing while simultaneously threatening shipwreck.

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[24] Ed Madden delves deeper into the numerous versions of the Tiresias myth, and points out one in particular in which "Tiresias as a young man hunting saw Athena bathing, and she blinded him—in some versions sprinkling water into his face as if to quench his voyeuristic or epistemophiliac sight. His mother, Chariclo, one of Athena's companions, asks the goddess to restore his sight; unable to do this, Athena gives him instead prophetic power" (36).

Within this recurring context of illness and travel, Morini's trajectory assumes the form of an inner conflict between Apollo and Dionysus, a vision reinforced by Espinoza and Pelletier in conversations about their friend and colleague. Their meta-literary reading of Morini sheds considerable light on his psychological transformation: "Espinoza y Pelletier se creían (y en su manera perversa eran) copias de Ulises, y … ambos consideraban a Morini como si el italiano fuera Euríloco, el fiel amigo del cual se cuentan en la *Odisea* dos hazañas de diversa índole. La primera alude a … su consciencia solitaria e individualista, a su duda metódica, a su retranca de marinero viejo" (67). This is a vision, however, that is entirely at odds with the subsequent version of Eurylochus' story, as seen through the eyes of Morini's colleagues:

> La segunda, en cambio, narra una aventura profana y sacrílega, la de las vacas de Zeus u otro dios poderoso, que pacían tranquilamente en la isla del Sol, cosa que despertó el tremendo apetito de Euríloco, quien, con palabras inteligentes, tentó a sus compañeros para que las mataran y se diesen entre todos un festín, algo que enojó sobremanera a Zeus o al dios que fuera … pues el dios en cuestión se sintió más molesto por la actitud, por la dialéctica del hambre de Euríloco que por el hecho en sí de comerse sus vacas, y por este acto … el barco en el que iba Euríloco naufragó y murieron todos los marineros. (67)

In this second description of Eurylochus, the element of Bacchic frenzy and excess offers a stark contrast to the controlled rationality of the former. Moreover, the vision of shipwreck calls to mind the aquatic images of Morini's nightmare, which ominously hint at pending downfall. Taken as a whole, this mythological backdrop further expands the constellation of images in the first part of the novel that evoke temptation, moral decay and death.

The implication embedded in this analogy is that Liz Norton is a Circe figure, from whom Morini, as Eurylochus, attempts to save Espinoza and Pelletier, the self-proclaimed

Odyssean voyagers. Consequently, we are presented with another powerful female figure who, like Medusa, signals the pitfalls of unchecked lust. As Bernard Knox explains: “It is Circe who punishes man for his role in Eros, suggesting that woman can be a creature who exacts revenge on man for the lust that drives him to see women only as passive beings to satisfy his desires” (36). The effects of Norton’s seductive charms on the two critics could hardly be more apparent, as they gradually abandon their single-minded academic focus and descend into a semi-catatonic state—at one point, they are described as drifting “como sonámbulos o como detectives drogados” (98). The abrupt shift in consciousness seen in the two critics invariably summons images of the *flâneur* and the *badaud*, in particular Walter Benjamin’s contention that whereas “the *flâneur* is always in full possession of his individuality … the individuality of the *badaud* disappears. It is absorbed by the outside world … which intoxicates him to the point where he forgets himself” (69). Espinoza and Pelletier clearly embody the latter, a precarious social state that leaves them vulnerable to the temptations of prostitution. The confused welter of sexual desire that possesses them contrasts sharply with the ironic description of their fellow literary critic colleagues who frequent the same conferences: “gente en general, digamos, racionalista … a quienes no les interesaba tanto la literatura como la crítica literaria” (100). The description then continues in such a way as to strip away what amounts to the veneer of Apollonian rationality to reveal an underlying barbarism: “de alguna manera se comportaban no como jóvenes sino como *nuevos jóvenes*, en la misma medida en que hay ricos y nuevos ricos … caníbales entusiastas y siempre hambrientos … sus rostros abotargados por el éxito, sus visajes que iban desde el hastío hasta la locura” (100). As a result, we witness a decisive shift in representation in Espinoza and Pelletier, from *flâneur* detective figures who heroically fend off the boredom of modern existence, to wandering vagrants in search of base pleasures, an animalistic state that opens up to encompass a broader critique of the debasing, exploitative nature of neoliberal economic policy.

Of the four critics, only Morini manages to retain a semblance of critical intuition, and it is primarily through his search for Edwin Johns that Bolaño begins to explore the fraught territory between artistic creation and the forces of the marketplace. Indeed, the intercalated story of the critics' visit to see Johns at a sanatorium in Switzerland provides a crucial link to the subtext of erotic temptation considered thus far. Before delving into the significance of Edwin Johns in the novel, it is important to take a look at the first mention of him during a conversation between Norton and Morini, in which the specter of barbaric art—a common motif throughout Bolaño's work—appears as a foreboding glimpse of artistic decline:

> Inauguró algo que luego se conocería como *Nuevo decadentismo* o *animalismo inglés*. Los cuadros de la exposición inaugural de esta escuela eran grandes … y mostraban, entre una amalgama de grises, los restos del naufragio de su barrio … los cuadros no eran malos. Pese a todo, la exposición no hubiera tenido ni el éxito ni la repercusión que tuvo de no ser por el cuadro estrella. Éste … era, bien mirado … una elipsis de autorretratos, en ocasiones una espiral de autorretratos … en cuyo centro, momificada, pendía la mano derecha del pintor. (76)

Contained within the descriptions of the artistic movements ushered in by Johns—*Nuevo decadentismo* and *animalismo inglés*—are permutations of the classic Bolaño archetype of the barbaric artist, echoing in particular the extremism of Carlos Wieder in *Estrella distante,* whose aesthetic was subsumed under the movement of *escritores bárbaros*. Perhaps more important than the sheer element of savagery implicit in Johns' masterpiece, however, is the sinister influence of capital lurking at the center of it. The description of the aftermath of the exhibition that follows bears this out: “La obra maestra … se la quedó un árabe que trabajaba en la Bolsa, así como cuatro cuadros grandes” (77). Furthermore, the gentrification of the painter’s neighborhood itself merits close attention: “Los pintores … comenzaron a instalarse en el barrio … Después llegaron los arquitectos y después algunas familias que compraron casas remodeladas y reconvertidas. Después aparecieron las tiendas de ropa, los talleres teatrales, los restaurantes alternativas, hasta convertirse en uno de los barrios más engañosamente baratos y a la moda en Londres” (77). What this paragraph reveals, in essence, is the debasement of art under monetary influence. The works that had previously been created amidst the decrepitude of Johns’ old neighborhood are traded for a commercial enterprise that converts art into an empty commodity, exploiting it for its cultural cachet.

It is a vision of debasement that calls to mind Bolaño’s scathing indictment of contemporary literary decadence in “El gaucho insufrible,” “El viaje de Álvaro Rousselot” and the essay “Derivas de la pesada,” an attack that laid bare his disdain for popular, mainstream writers with compromised literary values and an eye to financial stability. As Morini’s quest to find Archimboldi wavers, it mutates into an obsession with Edwin Johns, and he develops a fixation on one question in particular: “¿Por qué se mutiló?” (124). Johns’ response, in turn, strikes to the core of Bolaño’s concerns throughout the novel. As Morini discovers and later relays to an incredulous Norton: “Por dinero … Porque creía en las inversiones, en el flujo de capital, quien no invierte no gana, esa clase de cosas” (132). Johns’ subsequent plunge into insanity is seen, then, as inextricably linked to the disruptive force of the market; on a psychological plane, this process is emblematized in the spiral of self-portraits that chaotically envelop Johns’ mummified hand in his masterpiece. In echoes of Morini’s increasingly melancholic and scattered disposition, the motif points to the fragmentation of the self within an alienating capitalist framework.

Following a perhaps more obvious interpretive path, we invariably confront, in the image of Johns' mummified hand, strong undertones of castration. The right hand of the painter, symbolic of his art and livelihood, is in essence sacrificed on the altar of commercial enterprise. Sharae Deckard elaborates on the significance of this imagery, arguing: "The mummification suggests the dried-up residues of formerly emergent cultures that linger in the dominant, drained of radical vitality" (362). It is here, precisely, that the individual trajectories of Morini, Johns and Norton converge, centered on the dual images of Medusa and Johns' mummified hand. As we have seen, the plurality of the Medusa head evokes a sense not only of erotic temptation, but moreover the broader material temptations of the individual in a consumer society. It is worthwhile here to consider the interpretation offered by Karl Marx, for whom "Medusa's head embodies the social 'evils' that hide behind the 'veil' of normalized capitalist production. Just as Perseus's 'magic cap' shielded him from 'the monsters' he hunted … individuals now hide under their magic caps and pretend that the monsters of capitalism do not exist" (Garber, Vickers 77). Indeed, the image expands in *2666* to evoke the dangers of boundless desire in all forms, figuratively the abyss of Dionysian instinct that pervades the entire landscape of the novel. Furthermore, David Leeming points out the existential implications bound up in Medusa: "A more nihilistic alternative in the age of reason suggests that the Medusa's horrifying and destructive stare represents a revelation of the meaninglessness of life. To escape that meaninglessness—that 'Medusa Truth'—we live a lie" (60).

For Bolaño, it is clear that this "lie" may be taken to represent the artistic realm, recalling his interpretation of Baudelaire in which poetry is nothing more than a "pobre bandera" waved in defiance of horror and suffering, ultimately providing merely another distraction to stave off boredom and death. Framed in another sense, it is representative of the drive to impose order on chaos, a dilemma that finds expression through Morini's work as a literary critic, which for Bolaño carries associations of rationalism. One might surmise that this conflict—that of Apollonian rational endeavor against "the Medusa truth"—constitutes the primary force propelling Morini toward Johns. It is indeed noteworthy that Johns' conversation with Morini addresses precisely this battle between order and chaos. Johns explains:

> Mi amigo … creía en la humanidad, por lo tanto creía en el orden, en el orden de la pintura y en el orden de las palabras, que no con otra cosa se hace la pintura … La casualidad, por el contrario, es la libertad total a la que estamos abocados por nuestra propia naturaleza. La casualidad no obedece leyes y si las obedece nosotros las desconocemos. La casualidad … es como Dios que se manifiesta cada segundo en nuestro planeta. Un Dios incomprensible con gestos incomprensibles dirigidos a sus criaturas incomprensibles. En ese huracán, en esa implosión ósea, se realiza la comunión. (123)

The Borgesian overtones of Johns' declaration are difficult to ignore. The omnipresent notion of the universe as an incomprehensible labyrinth, "un infinito juego de azares," has received considerable attention from Borges scholars, particularly Donald Shaw, who asks: "How can we reconcile the depiction of a vision of reality which presents it as chaotic and labyrinthine, with the fact that it is contained in stories which reveal an exceptional degree of formal unity and coherence?" (132). The conclusion he reaches speaks to the essential ambivalence of Borges' writing: "he does not seem to have believed for a moment that aesthetic values provided a valid response to metaphysical problems. We are simply faced with a paradox

… Yet at the same time … it is idle to deny that Borges believed that literature could tell us something meaningful about life and reality, that it could make statements about something other than itself" (132-33). Paul de Man offers an additional commentary on this paradox, arguing:

> Our 'real' universe is like space: stable but chaotic. If, by an act of the mind comparable to Borges's will to style, we order this chaos, we may well succeed in achieving an order of sorts, but we dissolve the binding, spatial substance that held our chaotic universe together … style in Borges becomes the ordering but dissolving act that transforms the unity of experience into the enumeration of its discontinuous parts. (12)

In the first chapter of this study I sketched the contours of Borges' impact on Bolaño, and, indeed, this particular facet of Borges' artistic vision finds strong resonance in *2666*, among other works by Bolaño. One might even say that the same conflict—the individualist, Apollonian side of the writer forced to grapple, through the act of creation, with the incomprehensible disorder of daily lived experience—manifests itself throughout Bolaño's entire body of work. It, of course, addresses not only poetic insight in conflict with chaos but more broadly the struggle of the individual to assert his or her subjectivity amidst confusion and hostility in the surrounding world.

II. Recovering Eden: The Garden as Sanctuary in *2666*

At the core of Morini's quest into the whereabouts of both Edwin Johns and Archimboldi lies a strong questioning of this drive to create order out of chaos and dissolution. In the course of his relationship with Norton, one of the central manifestations of this tension is a consistent play on representations of Eden, juxtaposing the recovery of paradise with notions of temptation and downfall. One of the first appearances of the motif is during a scene in which Norton discusses the possibility of a *ménage à trois* with Espinoza and Pelletier while driving to

Kensington Gardens.[25] As they sit on a bench in the gardens gazing at the Peter Pan statue, Espinoza sees what appears to be a snake, to which Norton responds "¡Aquí no hay serpientes!" (85). There is, on one hand, a certain degree of symbolic suggestion invested in the image of Peter Pan, conjuring notions of childhood—conflated with the fantasy of literature itself—as an escape from the cold rationality of the adult world. Another approach to Bolaño's configuration of this garden landscape, however, aligns Norton with the biblical Eve; the serpent, in this case, not only evokes the erotic power of the Medusa but also carries strong connotations of temptation, corruption and original sin.

The scene contrasts sharply with the union of Morini and Norton toward the end of "La parte de los críticos." In Italy, Morini surprises Norton by taking her to a restaurant that is described as "en medio de un jardín en donde había bancos y estatuas de piedra … Algunas eran figuras mitológicas, pero otras representaban simples campesinos perdidos en la noche" (200). It is clear that in these disparate representations of gardens, Bolaño is drawing on a diverse literary history that portrays gardens alternately as sites of both perfection and decadence. As Simon Pugh explains: "The garden is a pervasive metaphor in culture … The metaphoric reference point of gardens is the idea of the garden as paradise, the site of a travesty, a falling away from bliss, but also the site of childhood, of both precultural bliss and of acculturation. As a lost state that is recreated through representation, the garden is the site of desire" (2). The rendezvous between Morini and Norton evokes precisely this tension. There is an element of peaceful perfection, reinforced by Norton's calmly concluding, "La verdad es que yo cada vez me sentía mejor" (200); at the same time, Bolaño's mention of stone figures, some of which are mythological in nature, guide us in the direction of Medusa's petrifying gaze and its suggestions of erotic transgression. It is also important to note the juxtaposition seen throughout *2666* between the garden as paradise, and the desert of Santa Teresa as a site of decay and death. At one point the connection is hinted at, in a letter from Augusto Guerra to Espinoza, Pelletier and Norton, in which "La despedida estaba adornada con una frase poética que comparaba el desierto con un jardín petrificado" (151). The motif, indeed, points to one of the central conflicts throughout the novel, repeatedly drawing the reader back to the epigraph, "Un oasis de horror en medio de un desierto de aburrimiento." The garden becomes an ambiguous landscape, always tainted with the notion of downfall, and from a literary standpoint hints at the omnipresent danger of Apollonian enlightenment collapsing into barbarism.

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[25] Mónica Maristain, biographer of Bolaño, notes that this scene in front of the Peter Pan statue is a nod to his friend, writer Rodrigo Fresán, whose novel *Jardines de Kensington* entails a fictionalized account of *Peter Pan* author J.M. Barrie's life.

In the burgeoning relationship between Morini and Norton, we are confronted with an erotic representation of this conflict between Apollo and Dionysus, played out against a backdrop that shifts between evocations of Edenic paradise and horror. Ostensibly, the close of the first book, in which Morini—as Perseus—has conquered the Medusa, points to a transcendence of the harsh indifference of the Mexican desert. Indeed, it is likely not coincidental that in the midst of the search for Archimboldi, Morini and Norton are distant from Santa Teresa, with all its connotations of horror and futility, while Espinoza and Pelletier remain as wandering sleepwalkers—the suggestion being that there is no possibility for love in an environment of such hostility and rampant corruption. As Pelletier had previously hypothesized, Pegasus springing from Medusa's body seems to symbolize the triumph of love and, in Leeming's words, "a new power and creative energy" (50). Nevertheless, it is significant that Bolaño ends the first book on a tenuous note, with Norton writing: "No sé cuánto tiempo vamos a durar juntos … Ni a Morini (creo) ni a mí nos importa. Nos queremos y somos felices" (207).

As such, their union represents a rare instance of renewal through non-sexual love in Bolaño's work, though it is portrayed in unstable terms. We are led to contrast their relationship with the debauched, commercial nature of Espinoza's and Pelletier's dalliances with prostitutes. Also noteworthy is Espinoza's relationship with a high school girl who sells rugs at a crafts market in Santa Teresa. Their short-lived liaison is one in which erotic desire is mediated through the exchange of commodities, as Espinoza's courting of the girl blurs into a purchasing frenzy and eventually a glut of rugs and serapes on his hotel bed.

Again, we find in Espinoza a faithful representation of the *flâneur* figure, who confronts the ennui of modernity by indulging in the comforts of the marketplace. As Walter Benjamin argues: "The department store is the last promenade for the *flâneur*. If in the beginning the street had become an *intérieur* for him, now this *intérieur* turned into a street, and he roamed through the labyrinth of commodities as he had once roamed through the labyrinth of the city" (85). And Christine Buci-Glucksmann emphasizes that the *flâneur* "epitomizes the detached, nihilistic observer of society … the externally observing eye, gazing at the novel luxuries and consumption items of a modern capital." She stresses, furthermore, that "the phenomenon of 'flâneurism' can be regarded as an essential feature of modern alienation, indicating as it does our estrangement from the social in a world of commodity fetishism" (27). This archetype of the idle wanderer under the spell of desire and consumption is at the core of not only Bolaño's characterization but also his treatment of eroticism, a motif that is consistently circumscribed by notions of insatiability and the forces of the market. These two interconnected themes, as we will see, figure prominently in both "La parte de Amalfitano" and "La parte de Archimboldi."

III. Erotic and Poetic Obsession in "La parte de Amalfitano"

In the part of the novel centered on the Chilean literary critic Óscar Amalfitano, we are presented with several crucial figures whose individual trajectories evoke the archetype of the aforementioned quest for meaning, in conflict with elements of passion and longing—both in a literary and an erotic sense. The first is Amalfitano's wife Lola, whose quest is driven by a desire that appears to be literary, though it is underpinned by an unwavering erotic impulse. Her mission, specifically, entails visiting her favorite poet at the Mondragón insane asylum in Spain,[26] a man with whom she claims to have engaged in an evening of endless love-making, not unlike other numerous instances of such mythic sexual encounters in Bolaño's work: "En esta fiesta, que Lola definía como una fiesta salvaje … se había acostado con él y habían hecho el amor toda la noche, aunque Amalfitano sabía que no era verdad, no sólo porque el poeta era homosexual, sino porque la primera noticia que tuvo Lola de su existencia se la debía a él, que le había regalado uno de sus libros" (213). The narrator's initial explanation, however, offers only a vague approximation to her single-minded obsession, a vision revealed to Amalfitano in a letter sent by Lola from San Sebastián: "y luego dijo lo que de verdad quería decirle: que ella sabía que él no era homosexual … que ella sabía que el amor maltratado, mutilado, dejaba siempre abierta una rendija a la esperanza … y que su materialización, su objetivación consistía en fugarse del manicomio con ella y emprender el camino de Francia" (222). Her pilgrimage to the insane asylum recalls Morini's journey to Edwin Johns in the first book, in the sense that she seeks to impart a semblance of order on an individual whose very existence—and, indeed, his aesthetic—is bound up in chaos and dissolution.

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[26] Bolaño is referring to Spanish poet Leopoldo María Panero, who actually resided at the Mondragón asylum (for detailed biographical information, see J. Benito Fernández' *El contorno al abismo: vida y leyenda de Leopoldo María Panero*). Panero is mentioned explicitly in Bolaño's *Los sinsabores del verdadero policía,* in which the protagonist undertakes a similar journey to visit the poet.

Regarding the real-life Leopoldo María Panero on whom Bolaño bases this character, David William Foster notes that he "introduces a gay identity into his work that moves the text toward the dark tunnel of desire and execration" (120). And Panero's biographer J. Benito Fernández affirms: "No cesa en el proyecto, su crítica radical se centra en la individualización de las formas de opresión y alienación de la sociedad capitalista y en la fijación de los objetivos de la liberación del hombre. Leopoldo intensifica sus contactos para lograr adeptos y así liberar al hombre definitivamente de la opresión sexual" (172-73). It is revealing, then, to consider Lola's dream of hope, order and stability, which revolves around forcing a heterosexual awakening and thereby "correcting" Panero's homosexuality: "Por la noche nos leerás tus poemas y harás el amor conmigo … Viviremos como profetas mendigos o como profetas niños mientras los ojos de París estarán enfocados en otros blancos … los juegos de azar … el producto interior bruto, la exportación de armas … todo aquello que al cabo sólo será la escenografía de los primeros meses de nuestro feto" (222-223). She puts forth, in essence, a utopian vision in which poetry is a pure, unsullied form of escape—invested with the ordering power of creation—that stands in defiance of the corrupt capitalist machinery of Parisian society, described here in decadent terms.

As a result, there is considerable irony in Lola's subsequent lapse into sexual abandon, ultimately hinting at the ambivalence of Bolaño's conception of eroticism and poetry; while potentially redemptive, they nonetheless connote danger and contagion. Following her departure from the asylum, she encounters a man named Larrazábal who takes her to see the cemetery near the asylum, where they impulsively have sex in the niche of the man's deceased mother. The encounter, in a more obscure sense, hints at a connection between eroticism and death, which is later made more overt in her decision to camp out in an empty cemetery niche—a thinly-veiled foreshadowing of her eventual diagnosis of AIDS. It is also important to note the subtle monetary element coursing through the relationship between Lola and Larrazábal, pointing again to the notion of debased eroticism. One passage in particular merits close attention:

> Larrazábal dijo que él jamás había leído un poema. Añadió que no entendía la obsesión de Lola por el poeta. Yo tampoco entiendo tu manía de follar en un cementerio, dijo Lola, y sin embargo no te juzgo por eso. Pues es verdad, admitió Larrazábal, todas las personas tienen sus manías. Antes de que Lola se bajara del coche … Larrazábal deslizó subrepticiamente en su bolso un billete de cinco mil pesetas. (227)

Lying beneath this somewhat comic juxtaposition of poetry, eroticism and death are relatively clear-cut suggestions of prostitution. The connection is further delineated as Lola recounts to Amalfitano her first meeting with Larrazábal, which "concluyó con el vasco obligándola a aceptar como préstamo diez mil pesetas y la promesa de volver al día siguiente, antes de subirse al coche y de indicarle con un gesto a la puta que lo aguardaba impaciente que haga lo mismo" (229). Bolaño thus establishes a binary between the overriding passion that drives Lola toward the mad poet in the asylum, and the destructive eroticism that exists just outside of the asylum, where Lola is commodified as an object of lust. It should be noted, too, that the contrast in landscape raises questions about the meaning and, ultimately, the relativity of madness. Larrazábal's offhand admission that "todas las personas tienen sus manías" amounts to a suggestion that the purported "madness" that exists within the asylum walls acquires hues of normalcy when placed alongside the borderline necrophiliac tendencies of Larrazábal and the unwitting prostitution of Lola.

From a literary vantage her downfall is highly suggestive of the trajectory traced by many aspiring poets in the work of Bolaño; her obsession ultimately reveals itself to be an imaginary construct that she doggedly pursues at the expense of responsibility to others, specifically the husband and daughter she has abandoned. Her dreams of a carefree bohemian existence in Paris are slowly deformed, and we eventually learn, through a letter sent to Amalfitano, that she does in fact live in Paris, but makes a living cleaning large office buildings, seemingly a casualty of the system from which she sought to escape. As a result, this plot thread that follows Lola in her doomed pilgrimage to San Sebastián raises fundamental questions concerning not only poetry's potential ability to confront the hostility of modern life, but more broadly the implications of a solitary obsession that precludes engagement on a human level.

It will be worthwhile now to consider the wider significance of the anonymous mad poet in the Mondragón asylum who occupies such a central position within this part of the novel. It is clear from the outset that Bolaño beckons the reader to consider the poet's chaotic image alongside that of Edwin Johns in the first book. Indeed, the parallels between them are striking; there is, first of all, the association with each of a decadent aesthetic. But while Bolaño firmly establishes Johns as a paragon of barbaric art, relatively little is known of the Mondragón poet, at least in terms of his actual poetry. What we do have, however, is the intriguing and controversial biographical antecedent of Leopoldo María Panero. In an article that explores Panero's visible media presence in Spain, John Burns notes the paradoxical status that his representation entails: "Panero is typically cast … as mad man, as authentic bohemian, and as an antidote to the repetitive doldrums of globalization" (126). At the same time, he argues, "Panero represents the emergence of the *figure* of the poet as a minor media spectacle in the age of information" (127). As Burns recognizes, there is significance in the fact that the poet's presence at the asylum in *2666* recalls that of a celebrity. This status is underscored by the presence of the poet's doctor, Gorka, who reveals himself to be the poet's future biographer as well. He explains to Lola and her travel companion: "algún día el público de España tendrá que reconocerlo como uno de los grandes, no digo yo que le vayan a dar algún premio … la carrera de las letras en España está hecha para los arribistas, los oportunistas y los lameculos" (224). Gorka gradually sketches a landscape in which the official literary establishment is in conflict with the chaotic spontaneity of the poet, for whom the asylum is the only available recourse. Indeed, he goes so far as to align himself and the rest of the asylum's occupants with the poet and, furthermore, to delineate the boundaries between order and chaos that orient the poet's psyche in opposition to institutional control:

> algún día todos, finalmente, saldremos de Mondragón y esta noble institución de origen eclesiástico y fines benéficos se quedará vacía. Entonces mi biografía tendrá algún interés y podré publicarla, pero mientras tanto … lo que tengo que hacer es reunir datos, fechas, nombres, compulsar anécdotas … historias que ahora giran en torno a un centro gravitacional caótico, que es nuestro amigo aquí presente, o lo que él nos quiere mostrar, su aparente orden, un orden de carácter verbal que esconde, con una estrategia que creo comprender pero cuyo fin ignoro, un desorden verbal que si lo experimentáramos, aunque sólo fuera como espectadores de una puesta en escena teatral, nos haría estremecernos hasta un grado difícilmente soportable. (225)

What the doctor is describing here amounts to the essence of poetry, in the sense of an attempt at imparting verbal order on disparate psychological elements and capturing an elusive essence, specifically the unpredictable, instinctual, Dionysian side of one's consciousness. It also alludes to the purported role of not only the asylum but the biographer himself, whose interest lies in compiling the chaotic facts of the poet's existence into a palatable whole, fit for the consumption of the masses. As such, Bolaño establishes a dialectic between order and reason, on one hand, and poetic insanity on the other.

Nevertheless, by invoking Panero's public visibility as a "mad poet," Bolaño probes the phenomenon by which poetic insight risks degradation by outside consumer influence. Daniel Woolls notes the perception in certain acquaintances close to Panero that he was "clever about making a sort of cottage industry out of being a poetic enfant terrible who lives for free in state-financed psychiatric hospitals" ("Spanish Schizophrenic Poet Lauded") and points out moreover that, being self-committed, he was free to leave the asylum at any time if he chose to do so. In this case, madness is not only cultivated as an aesthetic, but it also comes to signify a dangerous self-consciousness that seeks to brand and sell madness as a product. The asylum, rather than an instrument of repressive control, becomes a sanctuary, actively chosen by the poet as a refuge from a hostile world. Through this glimpse of the Mondragón poet's institutional experience, there is a clear division between his past identity, that of poet, and his current one, simply mad man—in the words of the narrator, "el más grande y el más iluso poeta de España" (231). It is significant that his primary mode of existence is not artistic—he is never represented in the act of writing or reciting poetry—but rather consists of blowing smoke rings, visual evocations of his career's impermanence. Another such indication comes in the form of a minor physical altercation with two other patients in the asylum, witnessed by Lola from outside the asylum walls. In the aftermath of the bizarre turn of events, the poet issues a telling resignation, tempered by a glimmer of defiance: "Alzó una mano como quien alza los jirones de una bandera. Movió los dedos, cada dedo, como si éstos fueran una bandera en llamas, la bandera de los que nunca se rinden" (231). This portrayal of frail resistance, again, recalls the "pobre bandera" that Bolaño has invoked to symbolize the persistent poetic endeavor that attempts to weather the onslaught of modern life.

The episode as a whole is shot through with Bolaño's characteristically bellicose conception of literature as war. At one point in "La parte de Amalfitano" we are introduced to a character, Marco Antonio Guerra—the son of a dean at the University of Santa Teresa—who is the living embodiment of this vision. Aside from the fairly obvious implications of his name, whose invocation of Mark Antony seems to hint at the notion of doomed resistance, he appears to Amalfitano in the form of raw, visceral aggression, a crusader ready to defend poetry to the death. Responding to Amalfitano's asking him what books he reads, he responds: "hoy sólo leo la poesía. Sólo la poesía está fuera del negocio. No sé si me entiende, maestro. Sólo la poesía, y no toda, eso que quede claro, es alimento sano y no mierda … La voz del joven Guerra surgió, fragmentada en esquirlas planas, inofensivas, desde una enredadera, y dijo: Georg Trakl es uno de mis favoritos" (288-289). Poetry here is seen as the last literary stronghold in a battle to fend off commercial debasement. And Bolaño's mention of Georg Trakl is not likely a haphazard one. While Bolaño acknowledged being a great admirer of the poet's work, his aesthetic and biographical antecedents summon an unmistakable subtext of madness in bitter conflict with the light of reason—a current that runs parallel to that of the Mondragón poet. Of Trakl, Allen Thiher notes: "Through his own madness he spoke for the fall of all those anonymous mad he saw in the asylums … Trakl faced his alienation with the anguish of the writer who finds that, in madness, his discourse is not really his own" (254). We ultimately arrive at what may be taken to be the crux of Trakl's—and in many ways, Panero's—psychological and poetic struggle, in Thiher's view "the dilemma of the mad writer who wants to be mad on his or her own terms" (256), or, more specifically, the "desire for an idiolect, for a self-created logos uncontaminated by medicine and reason" (255). To be sure, this is a conflict that resides at the core of the Mondragón poet's experience. His attending physician stands in for the uncomprehending gaze of the Other on the outside, attempting to arrange his very being and aesthetics into an orderly whole, while the poet's principal drive consists of forging a more hermetic path, in essence channeling the chaos and madness of the psyche into a vital poetic structure that thrives outside of reason.

It must also be noted that Marco Antonio Guerra embodies, beyond his iconoclastic language, a certain physicality that Bolaño associates with the blood-and-guts melee that constitutes the foundation of literature. Guerra's description of his sadomasochistic nocturnal rituals is revealing: "A veces salgo por la noche y voy a bares que usted ni se imagina. Allí me hago el joto … un puto joto presumido y con dinero que mira a todos por encima del hombro … Dos o tres zopilotes me invitan a salir afuera. Y comienza la madriza. A veces son ellos los que salen malparados … Otras veces soy yo. No me importa. Necesito estas pinches salidas" (288). Again, we find a close intertwining of eroticism, violence and poetry; the sexual release that Guerra finds in his provocations immediately calls to mind the cab driver beating that brings Espinoza and Pelletier so close to ecstasy in the first part of the novel. In this case the subtext of literary aesthetic is close at hand, and there is good reason to suppose that the "putizas apocalípticas" in which Guerra engages are a metaphoric stand-in for the life-and-death struggle to maintain the elemental purity of poetry in the face of artistic debasement in consumer culture. Chris Andrews points out Bolaño's frequent inclination to glorify poetry in this context: "If Bolaño believed that poetry was nobler than prose, it was not just because of its ancient lineage, to which he was fond of alluding … but also because, in the long battle of genres, it is the great loser, preserved from mercantile corruption (if not from other kinds) by its marginality" (190). At the same time, he cautions against the temptation to superimpose Bolaño's aesthetic vision on that of his protagonists, citing as evidence Amalfitano's subsequent reflection on the grandiosity of novelists who search beyond the perfection of short works to undertake monumental novels,—a fairly direct reference to Bolaño's own shift to sprawling works of fiction later in his literary career—in which he laments:

> Ya ni los farmacéuticos ilustrados se atreven con las grandes obras, imperfectas, torrenciales, las que abren camino en lo desconocido … quieren ver a los grandes maestros en sesiones de esgrima de entrenamiento, pero no quieren saber nada de los combates de verdad, en donde los grandes maestros luchan contra aquello, ese aquello que nos atemoriza a todos, ese aquello que acoquina y encacha, y hay sangre y heridas mortales y fetidez. (289-90)

Andrews rightly points out that the distinct literary ideals of Guerra and Amalfitano appear at odds—the distinction between poetry and prose seems clear enough—though, more than merely antithetical tendencies, they seem to enact the conflicted drives of Bolaño himself, bemoaning the endangered status of poetry on one hand, while also looking with hopeful nostalgia to the 'imperfect novel,' which by its very nature contains poetry within it. Nevertheless, Andrews also notes the broader significance that underpins Bolaño's conception of poetry, which "stands for something more than a kind of verbal composition," something more akin to "youthful openness preserved beyond the point at which it is typically lost" (193). For Bolaño, this dialectic between child and adult is omnipresent, and points back to the distinct creative impulses signaled by Apollo and Dionysus. There is a strong sense in which the tidy, 'perfect' novel evokes Apollonian maturity, while it's messy, flawed counterpart aligns with the chaotic, unyielding vigor of Dionysus, which must be tamed through the structuring act of creation. The contrast is made especially clear in the episode involving Efraim Ivánov and Borís Ansky in the novel's final part.

IV. Illness and Infinite Desire in "La parte de Archimboldi"

The embedded story concerning the life and writing of Borís Ansky develops from papers found by Hans Reiter in a hiding spot during World War II. The story is primarily, as Jean Franco notes, "an artifice that allows Reiter to follow the story of the Soviet persecution of writers and the extermination of the Jews" (245). From a different vantage, though, the story is also an exploration of the oft-recurring tension between writing as a potential path to enlightenment, and writing as a chaotic confrontation with hostility and corruption. It is through Ansky's acquaintance with the science fiction writer Ivánov that Bolaño revisits this dialogue. At one point we are told:

> Para Ivánov un escritor de verdad … era básicamente una persona responsable y con cierto grado de madurez … Un escritor de verdad tenía que ser alguien razonablemente tranquilo, un hombre con sentido común… ¿Qué es lo primero que hace uno cuando entra en una iglesia?, se preguntaba Efraim Ivánov. Se quita el sombrero … Los escritores adolescentes, por el contrario, entraban en una iglesia y no se quitaban el sombrero ni aunque los molieran a palos, que era, lamentablemente, lo que al final pasaba. (892)

A closer look at the relationship between Ansky and Ivánov traces the contours of the Apollo-Dionysus dialectic; as Bolaño fleshes out Ivánov's aesthetic as a novelist, we find that he is caricatured much like Urrutia Lacroix in *Nocturno de Chile*, a writer for whom an excessive pursuit of order and rectitude combines with a heavy-handed ideological focus, ultimately leading him down a path of mediocrity and oblivion. Ansky's questioning of Ivánov's fears offer a rather explicit indication of writerly presumption fueled by fantasies of immortality, made even more explicit by subsequent interview fragments in which Ivánov implies that he is “el Cervantes de la literatura fantástica” (904). Ansky reflects:

> ¿A qué tenía miedo Ivánov? … El miedo de Ivánov era de índole literaria … Miedo a que sus esfuerzos y afanes caigan en el olvido. Miedo a la pisada que no deja huella … Miedo a habitar, para siempre jamás, en el infierno de los malos escritores. Miedos irracionales, pensaba Ansky, sobre todo si los miedosos contrarrestaban sus miedos con *apariencias*… Una apariencia que variaba, por supuesto, según la época y los países, pero que siempre se mantenía como tal, apariencia, cosa que parece y no es, superficie y no fondo, puro gesto. (903)

We recall, in particular, Nietzsche’s description of Apollo as the god of semblance; in words that shed light on Ivánov’s self-declared aesthetic of moderation, Nietzsche argues that the image of Apollo “must include that measured limitation, that freedom from wilder impulses, that wise calm of the image-making god. His eye must be ‘sun-like’ and calm; even when it is angry and shows displeasure, the consecrated aura of lovely semblance surrounds it” (120). At the opposing end of the spectrum, of course, is Dionysus, of which Nietzsche writes: “Dionysiac art … is based on play with intoxication, with the state of ecstasy. There are two principal forces which bring naïve, natural man to the self-oblivion of intense intoxication: the drive of spring and narcotic drink” (120). We may take “the drive of spring” to signify the aforementioned erotic impulse, hinted at earlier in *The Birth of Tragedy* when Nietzsche speaks of “the approach of spring when the whole of nature is pervaded by lust for life” (17).

Occupying the other end of the Apollo-Dionysus continuum, opposite Ivánov, is Borís Ansky, precisely the embodiment of adolescence that seems to provoke in Ivánov a mixture of fear, admiration, and envy. In one glimpse of Ansky’s writings we find:

> A partir de la muerte de Ivánov el cuaderno de Ansky se vuelve caótico, aparentemente inconexo, aunque en medio del caos Reiter encontró una estructura y cierto orden … Habla sobre el sexo. Recuerda a Sade … ¿Sólo el sexo?, ¿sólo el sexo?, se pregunta repetidamente en notas escritas en los márgenes … Habla sobre los drogadictos de Moscú. Sobre los enfermos. Sobre los asesinos de niños. (910)

Clearly, the obsessions that haunt Ansky's writings are rooted in chaotic, instinctual urges, deviating markedly from Ivánov's aesthetic of restraint and balance. Ivánov, we come to realize, is merely a voyeur in the Dionysian realm. Following Ansky's romantic encounter with fellow poet Nadja Yurenieva, Ivánov presses him for details as if experiencing the act vicariously: "Ivánov … quiso saber cuántas horas lo habían hecho … Y luego las posturas. Y como Ansky satisfacía sin reparo todas sus preguntas Ivánov se fue yendo por el lado sentimental. Jodidos jóvenes, decía. Jodidísimos jóvenes. Ah, puerquita. Vaya con el par de marranos. Ay, el amor" (907). Ivánov's temporary lapse into sentimentalism, while comical, hints at the essence of Bolaño's late-life musings on illness, sexuality, and mortality. We have seen how his essay "Literatura + enfermedad = enfermedad" grapples with the phenomenon of sexual release as a potentially transcendent, though ultimately empty, experience. In the subsection entitled "Enfermedad y Dioniso" he writes: "Follar cuando no se tienen fuerzas para follar puede ser hermoso y hasta épico. Luego puede convertirse en una pesadilla" (*Entre paréntesis* 141). The parallels between Bolaño's oblique representation of his own desire in this essay and the intercalated story of Ansky and Ivánov are striking, and merit closer attention. In one scene Ansky tells his interlocutor:

> La realidad … en ocasiones es el puro deseo … Fíjate, por ejemplo, en algunas personas… En los enfermos … En los tuberculosos, por ejemplo. Para sus médicos ellos

> están muriendo y sobre esto no hay discusión posible. Pero para los tuberculosos … el deseo es la realidad y viceversa. O fíjate en los impotentes… Los impotentes sufren … más o menos como los tuberculosos, y *sienten* deseo. Un deseo que con el tiempo no sólo suplanta la realidad sino que se impone sobre ésta. (894)

We hear unmistakable echoes of these ideas in "Literatura + enfermedad = enfermedad," where Bolaño writes: "Follar es lo único que desean los que van a morir. Follar es lo único que desean los que están en las cárceles y en los hospitales. Los impotentes lo único que desean es follar. Los castrados lo único que desean es follar" (140). He has, in effect, taken the Mallarmé poem that constitutes one of the centerpieces of "Literatura + enfermedad = enfermedad"—specifically the highly resonant "La carne es triste" of the first line—and brought it to life in the philosophical conflict between Ivánov and Ansky. In Bolaño's interpretation of the poem, Mallarmé seems to reject literature and eroticism as figurative dead-end streets, choosing instead to stress the primacy of the journey as the only viable path. He suggests, furthermore, that for Mallarmé this journey may be envisioned as "libertad con el torso desnudo," and proceeds to argue "a la par que es una afirmación de la vida, también es un juego constante con la muerte y … en una escala jerárquica, es el primer peldaño de cierto aprendizaje poético. El segundo peldaño es el sexo y el tercero los libros" (146). Bolaño thus finds paradox and circularity in the notion that, at least according to his own interpretation of Mallarmé, the supposed freedom extolled by the poet leads invariably back to poetry and the flesh, invoked at the outset as hopeless attachments. As such, Bolaño adds to his analysis the aforementioned notion that "el deseo de leer y de follar es infinito, sobrepasa nuestra propia muerte" (146), and in doing so he equalizes both pursuits as avenues of escape from, and challenges to, death.

Thus we find these representations of sexual desire and writing cast in a hopeful, transcendent light; while teetering on the edge of abandon, they nonetheless present the possibility of transforming lived experience. It is this humanizing vision of literature that Ansky summons in his brief anecdote about a Siberian hunter whose genitalia had been torn off. He describes the hunter's frequent excursions into the forest in search of his sexual organs not as a futile pursuit, but rather as a life-affirming transformation: "siempre regresaba a la aldea … y siempre con la misma noticia: no los había encontrado. Un día decidió no salir más. Pareció envejecer de golpe: debía andar por los cincuenta pero de la noche a la mañana aparentaba unos ochenta años" (894-895). Curiously, Ansky notes, the hunter suddenly recovers an appearance of youthful vitality while in preparation for another prolonged excursion into the forest, implying that it is the search itself that gives his life meaning:

> Cuando nos marchamos … pensé que el cazador había logrado imponer su deseo a la realidad, que, a su manera, había transformado su entorno, la aldea, a los aldeanos, el bosque, la nieve, el pene y los testículos perdidos. Lo imaginé … caminando hacia el norte, hacia los desiertos blancos y hacia las ventiscas blancas, con la mochila cargada de trampas y con una absoluta inconsciencia de aquello que nosotros llamamos destino" (895).

In the exchange between Ansky and his interlocutor that follows this tale, we then arrive at the moral crux of Bolano's overarching vision of literary endeavor, which entails a process of confrontation, self-examination and transformation:

> -Es una bonita historia … Lástima que yo sea una mujer demasiado vieja y que ha visto demasiadas cosas como para creerla.
>
> -No se trata de creer –dijo Ansky-, se trata de comprender y después de cambiar. (895)

Thus, these intertwining notions of erotic desire and writing straddle a precarious line between decadence and transcendence. Indeed, while each is closely tied to Bolano's notions of the essential quest for understanding and positive social engagement, there remains a latent danger, linked earlier in this chapter to the image of the Medusa, in which these impulses are potentially destructive if not mediated by Apollonian restraint. We return, then, to the aforementioned subtext of sexual transgression as a destabilizing force, which, beyond the level of the aesthetic and the social, carries political associations of authoritarian violence.

V. The Marquis de Sade and the Aesthetics of Fascism in "La parte de Archimboldi"

In one of Michel Foucault's lectures on the Marquis de Sade, entitled "Why did Sade Write?," he argues that "the first function of writing … is to abolish the barrier between reality and imagination. Writing is that which excludes reality … Because of writing, we will have, to use Freudian vocabulary, a world entirely governed by the pleasure principle that will never have to encounter the reality principle" (108). In an analysis that helps to elucidate Bolaño's conflicted vision of literary creation and immortality, he continues: "Writing is the principle of repeated enjoyment … Sade provides the principle and the most radical, the most brazen sexual root for … writing as the principle of perpetually renewed sexual release" (109). He ultimately concludes, arriving at the question of why Sade wrote: "Writing is desire become truth, it is truth that has taken the form of desire, of repetitive desire … and it is the suppression of exteriority with respect to desire" (114). Given the undeniable Sadean echoes throughout *2666*, Foucault's reading of Sade provides a useful critical lens through which to view Bolaño's ideas on the infinitude of erotic longing, which we have seen developed in both "Literatura + enfermedad = enfermedad" and *2666* from similar angles.

The motif, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, surfaces in the unquenchable sexual desire of Lola in the second book, in the philosophical reflections of Ansky, and, of course, in Morini's quest throughout the first book. Indeed, considered in this light Morini's crippling disability, which remains unidentified throughout the entire novel, prompts a closer examination of the complex interplay between illness, desire, and the fleeting light of Apollonian control. When Ansky, speaking as a mouthpiece for the author himself, discusses the blurring of desire and reality for the impotent and the terminally ill, he is indirectly conjuring Morini's invalid condition, infused with a melancholy that may be understood, at least in this context, as stemming from repressed erotic urges. Through this intertwining of infinite desire and literature, Bolaño draws us back to the pessimistic, foreboding summation of "Literatura + enfermedad = enfermedad": "El vencedor es Dioniso. Y su antagonista o contrapartida ni siquiera es Apolo, sino don Pijo o doña Siútica o don Cursi o doña Neurona Solitaria, guardaespaldas dispuestos a pasarse al enemigo a la primera detonación sospechosa" (143).

As a result, the Sadean subtext becomes fundamental to understanding not only the erotic drives that propel the aforementioned protagonists, but also the routinized brutality that pervades "La parte de los crímenes." Sade's legacy comes to the forefront, in particular, in one crucial episode in "La parte de Archimboldi," in which Bolaño draws parallels between the sexual violence of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and the perversity of fascist ideology. The episode in question centers on Hans Reiter's passage through Romania with his battalion. They happen to stop at a castle where there is a banquet attended by an assortment of SS troops, along with the imposing Romanian general Eugenio Entrescu, his assistant—the intellectual Pablo Popescu, and the Baroness Von Zumpe. Among other topics raised at a dinner table conversation is the myth of Dracula, whom Popescu describes as "un patriota rumano que había opuesto resistencia a los turcos, hecho por el cual todas las naciones europeas, en cierta medida, debían estar agradecidas"; he laments a kind of historical revisionism in which "el hombre que frena el impulso conquistador de los turcos se transforma, gracias a un escritor inglés de segunda fila en un monstruo, en un crápula interesado únicamente por la sangre humana" (856). His ironic literary distortion notwithstanding—Bram Stoker was in fact an Irish writer—Popescu's defense of Dracula rings at least partially true, as the historical Vlad Tepes on whom Stoker based the literary Dracula was indeed an object of reverence due to his successful defense of the Wallachia region of Romania from Ottoman forces in 1462 (McNally, Florescu 49). His opinion overlooks, however, numerous historical accounts, particularly from Western Europe, that attest to varying forms of sadistic cruelty, including impaling, decapitation, burning, and cannibalism (McNally, Florescu 85). Bolaño plays here on the suggestive similarities between the foreign policy maneuvers of the historical Vlad Tepes and the brutality of fascism playing out in the present World War II context of "La parte de Archimboldi," which in turn prompts the reader to reflect on the infinitely transgressive violence being carried out against women in Santa Teresa in the fourth book of the novel. Popescu, in particular, is sketched out as the archetypal fascist apologist of which we have seen so many iterations throughout Bolaño's work. At one point he argues: "un asesino y un héroe se asemejan en la soledad y en la, al menos inicial, incomprensión" (851). We are drawn back to *Nocturno de Chile*, particularly Urrutia Lacroix's glorification of Ernst Jünger as an embodiment of the fascist 'hero,' the solitary *anarch* whom Elliott Neaman describes as "a kind of libertarian rebel" (54), who "plays by all the rules, externally, but in the private world refuses to conform to society's expectations" (186).

In the figure of Vlad Tepes, then, we detect the model of the 'hero' exalted in fascist ideology. Bolaño juxtaposes the historical with the literary by summoning Bram Stoker's melding of historical antecedent with vampire folklore, ultimately exposing the despotic sexual violence at its core. Lindsay Hallam, in her analysis of Sadean transgression in Francis Ford Coppola's film adaptation *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992), describes the title character as "a supernatural creature, a being that has turned against God and so is able to transgress the laws that govern beings that have been created by Him," and argues that he may be interpreted as "a Sadean natural being because he follows nature's transgressive flow by violating what had been deemed as an inherent natural law" (21). The principal manifestation of this transgression of natural laws is, of course, the predatory blood-sucking for which Dracula is perhaps best known. Hallam reminds us: "For the vampire, blood is a sexual fluid: it is drawn from another person in order to give life … The vampire, like the Sadean libertine, thinks only of his own survival and satisfaction, with its very existence depending on its ability to seduce and kill" (22). Noting the introduction of violence into the sexual act, she usefully highlights the Sadean undercurrent of bodily transgression, carried out, significantly, in a pattern of infinite desire. Shifting back to *2666*, it is clear that we are confronted, in General Entrescu, with an incarnation of Dracula, both in a historical sense and in the notion of the vampiric, Sadean monster. In one of the more vivid scenes in "La parte de Archimboldi," Hans Reiter and two other German soldiers stalk through dark, hidden passageways within the castle in search of the bedchamber of the Baroness Von Zumpe. Upon reaching their destination, they are able to peer through cracks in the wall and take voyeuristic pleasure in a scene that bears close attention:

> Cubierta por un hombre desnudo con abundancia de vello en la parte superior de la espalda y en las piernas, descubrieron a la baronesa Von Zumpe … Los gritos de la baronesa al principio alarmaron a Reiter, que tardó en comprender que eran gritos de placer y no de dolor. Cuando el apareamiento terminó el general Entrescu se levantó de la

> cama y lo vieron caminar hasta una mesa en donde descansaba una botella de vodka. (863-64)

Here we find the salient characteristics of the boundless sexual encounter so prevalent throughout *2666*, suffused with the violence of Sadean eroticism. Indeed, the scene acquires mythological overtones suggesting superhuman lust, and the figure of Dracula is close at hand, introducing a subtle element of literary transgression into what appears initially as merely a sexual act:

> El general rumano emprendió un nuevo recitado, recitado que acompañaba con el movimiento de ambos brazos (la baronesa agarrada a su cuello), un poema que una vez más ninguno de ellos entendió, a la excepción de la palabra Drácula, que se repetía cada cuatro versos, un poema que podía ser marcial o podía ser satírico o podía ser metafísico … pero cuyo ritmo se acomodaba que ni hecho a propósito para tal ocasión, poema que la joven baronesa … celebraba cimbrándose hacia atrás y hacia adelante, como una pastorcilla enloquecida en las vastedades de Asia, clavándole las uñas en el cuello de su amante, refregando la sangre que aún manaba de su mano derecha en la cara de su amante. (865)

Aside from the rhythmic poetics of Bolaño’s prose throughout this excerpt, we are invariably drawn to the fusion of the violent sexual act with the literary recitation—marked here with the significantly cyclical repetition of “Drácula”—suggesting the infinitely transgressive element of each. The narrative voice reinforces this notion, closing the scene with: “Cuando todo acabó, aunque para el inagotable Entrescu y la inagotable baronesa todo distaba mucho de haber acabado, desanduvieron en silencio los pasadizos secretos … y se acostaron en silencio junto a sus respectivas armas y petates” (866). We are confronted here with another crucial instance of unrestrained Dionysian excess, in multiple senses—poetic, erotic, and political. Characteristic of Bolaño's entire body of work, there is an inherent condemnation of complicity on the part of the literary establishment; while this context is specifically European, it nevertheless speaks to universal concerns that Bolaño had about literature's parasitic role in propagating a malignant barbarism, which he views as a form of contagion capable of spreading much like the Dracula curse.

In the final book of *2666* literature's unseemly relationship with fascism is pushed to the forefront, with sexual violence occupying a central position. In order to gain a fuller understanding of how Bolaño approaches this confluence of fascism, sadism and literature, it is essential to explore some of the philosophical and literary antecedents that have informed fascist ideology. Lewis Corey, in particular, points out Sade's enduring influence in the political arena, noting: "its anti-humanist, anti-liberal, and anti-democratic moods appear in the psychopathology of Communism and Fascism and in their ideology of despotism" (18). The critical foundation of sadism, in Corey's view, is "the sexual inequality and masculine despotism which insist that woman is made for the one-sided pleasure of men" (19). Addressing more recent manifestations of this pattern of violence, particularly in Ciudad Juárez, Rita Laura Segato argues that the decentralizing influence of open neoliberal markets has led to the spawning of "regional micro-fascisms," which "cannot but install a provincial totalitarianism, in a regressive conjunction of postmodernity and feudalism, where the female body is once again icon and annex of territorial domain" (84).

Jean Franco has noted the resonance of this phenomenon throughout *2666*, reinforcing the notion that Santa Teresa is a landscape where "there are no limits, no taboos, and the senselessness of life and death is revealed in all its cruel banality" (233). In the final book of

2666 Bolaño locates the root of this patriarchal domination in the Sadean foundation of totalitarianism, emblematized forcefully through the subtext of vampirism. It is here, too, that we find the essence of Bolaño's philosophy on writerly ethics, a hazy domain where the lofty ideal of artistic freedom is perpetually in danger of being co-opted or degraded by barbaric mentality. It is helpful here to consider Simone de Beauvoir's reaction to Sade's work, as it offers considerable insight into Bolaño's own notions of creativity and moral responsibility. Judith Butler, discussing Beauvoir's *Must we Burn de Sade?*, notes a surprising ambivalence, in which her endorsement of Sade's bold individuality is tempered by ethical concerns: "for Beauvoir, 'action' in the normative sense engages the collective or shared conditions of existence and their transformation, so she faults Sade finally for failing to emerge from the sensual tactics of the individual into a common world" (182). Beauvoir faults him, in other words, for his refusal to recognize the other in his perpetual search for self-gratification through cruelty. Perhaps most significant, though, is Beauvoir's observation that Sade's work, far from channeling the animalistic, Dionysian side of consciousness, paradoxically reveals an Apollonian obsession with clear-minded philosophical discourse. Butler writes:

> According to Beauvoir, … in sexual encounters he lacks the necessary experience of intoxication … Without intoxication there can be no passivity, which means that the boundaries of the self fail to give way to the 'ambiguous unity' of lovers in sexual exchange. Without the capacity to lose his lucidity, to undergo intoxication and passivity, Sade remains remote, cut off, 'sovereign,' and finally self-referential. (185)

Thus we return to one of the overarching themes of *2666* and the other works included in this study: the notion that an excessively one-sided obsession with the imaginary façade of literary creation negates the possibility of collective, humanistic engagement within the concrete reality of lived experience. The dominant motifs that signal this precarious slide, as we have seen, are largely erotic in nature, though they extend into the familiar terrain of neoliberal excess and literary decline—namely, the all-consuming gaze of the Medusa, the intersection of illness, melancholy and sexual desire, and the pervasive, unsettling presence of Sadean violence that underpins fascist ideology.

The journeys undertaken by the protagonists of *2666* may be said to align with those in Bolaño's body of work as a whole; they are, in many cases, punctuated by desperation, futility and loss. The notion of eroticism as a potential source of communion and refuge from the harshness of the outside world appears optimistically in the relationship between Morini and Norton, with the attendant garden imagery that subtly hints at transcendence, though we invariably sense that a narcissistic projection of individual desire threatens moral dissolution. We have seen this, too, in "La parte de Amalfitano," where Lola holds lofty visions of a similar sexual utopia with the Mondragón poet, but ultimately faces degradation outside the asylum walls. Literature represents another potentially utopic space in *2666*, embodied in the humanizing vision put forth in Ansky's writings, which confers upon the writer the ability to positively transform external social reality. This vision, nevertheless, is counterbalanced by the numerous artists and writers throughout the novel that carry with them an outward pretense of insight and individuality, but fail to reach out to the other, and collapse into barbarism and conformity. There is a palpable fear, lurking in other Bolaño works but resurfacing in *2666* with particular urgency, that literature, with its connotations of youthful rebellion and enlightenment, is under threat of annihilation by the forces of callousness and indifference that appear as by-products of the neoliberal drive toward endless consumption. This final work is not only, as Jean Franco has suggested, an "elegy" for a lost and forgotten poetic ideal (234), but also a desperate appeal to for a revival of this ideal, embodied in the bravery of the rare artist who is able to overcome ego-driven notions of immortality and forge a path of confrontation with the repressive social and economic structures of modern life.

Conclusion

Bolaño closes his late-life exploration of writing and illness, "Literatura + enfermedad = enfermedad," with a somewhat indeterminate conclusion regarding the role of literature. The final sub-section of the essay is entitled "Enfermedad y Kafka," and finds Bolaño reflecting on Kafka's illness and death from tuberculosis through the familiar lens of literary immortality: "Kafka comprendía que los viajes, el sexo y los libros son caminos que no llevan a ninguna parte, y que sin embargo son caminos por los que hay que internarse y perderse para volverse a encontrar o para encontrar algo, lo que sea, un libro, un gesto, un objeto perdido, para encontrar cualquier cosa, tal vez un método, con suerte: lo *nuevo*, lo que siempre ha estado allí" (158). We return, then, to the notion of Bolaño's fiction as a probing of the limits of modernity, an obscure terrain where the writer must enter the darkest reaches of consciousness and attempt to emerge illuminated. Embedded within these references to "method" and "*lo nuevo*," of course, is the aesthetic equilibrium that we have seen develop between chaos and oblivion, on one hand, and structured unity on the other.

The life-long search to which Bolaño alludes above, which is so often constituted in the recuperation of lost fragments of rationality and humanity out of the rubble of social and economic disasters, assumes many forms throughout the works studied in this project. In the first chapter of this study, which focused on the short stories "El gaucho insufrible" and "El viaje de Álvaro Rousselot," we saw how Bolaño situates the recurring tension between Apollo and Dionysus in the sterile pampa of Argentina, which becomes a multivalent image suggestive of both a proud literary tradition that exalts freedom and resilience, and, conversely, barbaric individualism and herd mentality. The pampa is thus a space of mediation between what Bolaño senses is a nihilistic tendency to dwell in irredeemable violence and decay, and a more transcendent possibility of exploration beyond the limits of national literature. Álvaro Rousselot’s journey from Buenos Aires to Paris hints at such a possibility, tracing a well-tread path that initially promises an enlightened solution to the stagnation of provincial literature. The two stories, then, enact the civilization-barbarism debate that circumscribed Latin American literature particularly in the nineteenth century. The Paris that Rousselot encounters—a debased, corrupt mutation of the metropolis that had captivated the Latin American literary imagination—essentially mirrors the transfiguration of the pampa that a disillusioned Héctor Pereda discovers in his idealistic retreat from urban life in “El gaucho insufrible.” Both Pereda and Rousselot, significantly, begin their quests in positions of relative order and domestic stability, and end in varying states of desperation and crisis. It is precisely at their respective moments of finding illusions crumbled that they initiate a search for transcendence of their conditions, analogous with the charting of a new aesthetic course. This process of renewal is expressed on the structural level through the web of intertextual allusions that underpins each story, pointing to a vision of parody in which the writer dialogues with and deconstructs literary antecedents, in order to ultimately generate new ideas through an act of intellectual creation. Thus both stories engage with the Apollo-Dionysus dialectic in such a way that foregrounds not only the critical importance of Apollonian intellect to impose order on fragmentation, but also the necessity of immersing oneself in the chaotic, hostile elements of modern life as a vital process of self-understanding.

It is this sense of balance that largely eludes Sebastián Urrutia Lacroix in *Nocturno de Chile*. His literary aesthetic, constructed on a foundation of self-deception, tilts heavily in the direction of Apollonian appearances, illusions and dreams. While priding himself on his impeccable silences and ordered existence, his outwardly immaculate narrative masks an inner reality marked by the guilt of complicity, and portrays him in the process of dissolution. Within this highly elastic framework, the Dionysian can be seen in positive terms as signifying social communion and identification with the suffering of others, offering an antidote to the melancholic alienation that punctuates Urrutia Lacroix's confession. It may be said, then, that his downfall is directly linked to his inability to engage rationally with social and political conditions, and moreover to his failure to recognize that literature cannot be severed from its mutually-transformative relationship with this external reality.

His trajectory is, as we have seen, the inverse of that traced by Pierre Pain in *Monsieur Pain*. While Pain shares Urrutia Lacroix's social isolation and crisis of responsibility, his attempts to achieve a form of communion through animal magnetism are decidedly more Dionysian than Apollonian. The surrealist undercurrents of his confused nocturnal meandering point to an exaltation of unconscious instinct over rational control, and lead Pain to the eventual realization that his mesmerist techniques, which are held up ostensibly as means of healing himself and others, have been rendered ineffectual and corrupt by fascist interference. Thus in both works the protagonists are confronted with another aesthetic impasse; the endings lay bare an ambivalence that on one hand suggests the futility of their pursuits, while also allowing for a more redemptive scenario in which writing, as a process of introspection, penitence and transformation, represents an ongoing quest that continues beyond the pages of their narratives.

We have seen, then, how literature in the works of Bolaño is perpetually at risk of falling into sterile political binaries, and, indeed, Bolaño's invocation of literary fascism is repeatedly marked by a sense that the rigid barriers that his characters purport to erect between their writing and external political reality are in essence illusory, and ultimately collapse to reveal the permeability of these conceptual divisions. This tension is illustrated with particular clarity in *El*

Tercer Reich, where the presence of laughter is an omnipresent marker of authority and control, wielded by Udo Berger in an attempt to maintain elevated distance between himself and those around him. This laughter signals not only superiority over and degradation of the other, but also a certain Apollonian pretense to authorial control and clarity, whereby Udo attempts to confer upon his diary an autonomy from the concrete world outside his writing and war games. At the same time, laughter possesses animalistic undertones that evoke the madness of self-love, echoing back at Udo and ultimately exposing the instability of his fascist worldview constructed on notions of difference and exclusion. The final destructive scene, which erupts significantly outside of the hotel room where Udo is playing Tercer Reich with El Quemado, points to the element of contagion inherent in Udo's games and writings, and enacts a dismantling not only of distinctions between opposing political stances, but also of assumed divisions between art and social reality.

We find in the laughter that courses through *Amuleto* an attempt to subvert this notion of ideological polarity. In contrast to the laughter of *schadenfreude* in *El Tercer Reich,* we noted how laughter shifts between expressions of individual transcendence, consistent with Nietzsche's views on laughter as synonymous with overcoming and making light of one's own misfortunes, and the communal, carnivalesque invocation of Bakhtinian laughter as constitutive of resistance to totalitarian structures. At the same time, however, we also detect in Auxilio the Baudelairean laughter of the mad individual, more broadly suggestive of narcissistic self-delusion. In this way, laughter foregrounds a recurring aesthetic conflict between Apollonian elevation and oracular insight—which imply detachment from the political and hint indirectly at madness—and Dionysian associations of active engagement. In each of these selections the use of the first-person narrative perspective is a structural manifestation of this unresolved conflict, and finds the writer-protagonists attempting to create narrative and emotional distance, but eventually confronting the fact that this perspective precludes openness and engagement.

We saw this notion of one-sidedness expressed forcefully in *2666* through the intertwining of erotic desire and Sadean transgression at the level of the literary, each closely linked to authoritarian tendencies. The image of the Medusa, in particular, embodies the internal struggles that take place in the literary critics of the first book, as their ostensibly rationalist undertaking is increasingly undermined by an all-consuming drive to satisfy base desires. Elsewhere in the novel, we saw how the Dionysian underpinnings of the Medusa figure conjure an overarching vision in which artistic creation appears in highly variable terms, as both a source of contagion and as a potential cure. Here, too, we revisit Bolaño's invocation of the Baudelairean "oasis of horror," which essentially represents the illuminating promise of literary endeavor, threatened by the manipulation and corruption of external forces. It is this precarious balance that defines Edwin Johns' descent into the barbaric underworld of commercialized art and urban decay, as well as the Mondragón poet's voluntary institutional confinement, which opts for consciously-curated madness as an escape from the hostility of everyday life.

Nevertheless, the glimmers of optimism that we have seen—most notably, the union of Morini and Norton at the end of the first book, inscribed by Edenic connotations—are broadly representative of a confidence in the humanizing capacity of Apollonian reflection to forge intersubjective bonds, and to resist the dehumanizing conditions imposed by the neoliberal paradigm. In the juxtaposition developed through the relationship between Efraim Ivánov and Borís Ansky in the final book, we find another reminder that the recurring dialectic between Apollo and Dionysus possesses a significant aesthetic dimension for Bolaño. Embedded in this interplay between their distinct literary approaches is an incarnation of the Janus-faced writer who must wrestle with the violent, incomprehensible impulses at the core of human experience through the conscious, rational ordering of artistic creation. As Daniela Omlor has noted, Bolaño envisions a similar transformation for the reader, who confronts the cold objectivity that marks the descriptions of brutal femicide in “La parte de los crímenes” and unwittingly enters a mindset of detection and questioning (668). The reader, in essence, assumes the position occupied by Hans Reiter in his hiding spot in Russia during World War II, devouring the writings of Ansky composed years before in the very same hiding spot. Thus literature presents itself as a chain of dialogue across history, as Ansky’s own writings invoke reading as an infinite and profoundly edifying venture that stretches into all areas of his life. He speaks of “la lectura y la visita a museos, la lectura y los paseos por el parque, la lectura y la asistencia casi maniática a toda clase de conciertos, veladas teatrales, conferencias literarias y políticas, de las que extrajo muchas y muy buenas enseñanzas, y que supo aplicar al bagaje de cosas vividas que tenía acumuladas” (887).

Here again we see literature transforming reality at the level of individual consciousness. Just as reading had shaped Ansky’s intellectual and artistic formation, the fragments of Ansky’s writings that Reiter desperately clings to while in his hiding spot are closely tied to notions of healing and survival. He reads Ansky not only for the sheer pleasure the experience offers as an escape from the horrors of war, but moreover inserts himself imaginatively in the Russian’s life and fills in textual gaps much like a detective attempting to solve a crime. The reader of *2666*, it is expected, will engage in a similar process of critical dialogue, introspection and transformation. In unmistakable echoes of “Literatura + enfermedad = enfermedad,” Ansky speaks of revolution—and, indirectly, of writing—as a force that will “abolish” death: “Abolirla para siempre, sumergirnos todos en lo desconocido hasta encontrar otra cosa” (888). It is here, finally, that we revisit one of the primary manifestations of Apollo throughout Bolaño’s work, in which the rational trappings of the detective figure suggest that literature is constituted in the possibility of initiating a dialogue with text and self, and using the insights gained from this exchange to confront the disorder and hostility of lived experience and actively engage with one’s social and political reality.

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