

## “Bolaño and the Canon.”

Ricardo Gutiérrez-Mouat  
Department of Spanish & Portuguese  
Emory University  
Atlanta, Georgia 30322

Roberto Bolaño's biography and literary career can be summarized in a few words: he was born in Santiago in 1953, left his native Chile with his family in 1968, led a group of marginal poets in the Mexico City of the mid-1970s, moved to the Catalan region of Spain later that decade – where he took up writing novels and stories--, published *The Savage Detectives* in 1998 (for which he won the Herralde and Rómulo Gallegos prizes in consecutive years), and died in 2003 of a liver condition shortly after being consecrated as the most important writer of his generation and a year before the publication of his monumental work *2666*. He was a writer who labored in relative obscurity for over two decades before making his mark in the literary world, writing poems and authoring some hard to classify novels set in Barcelona, Girona, Paris, and Blanes but featuring Latin American characters.<sup>1</sup> Canonization in the Hispanic world was followed by canonization in the English-speaking world, where the Bolaño boom was, however, conditioned by the repackaging of his figure for a U.S. audience. (See Pollack).<sup>2</sup> Whereas Bolaño's stature abroad depended to some extent on a new set of cultural stereotypes, in Latin America and Spain his standing among fellow writers and readers was grounded on Bolaño's ability to recast the avant-garde tradition and the legacy of the Boom in a fresh narrative language that is simultaneously visionary and colloquial. This essay focuses on Bolaño's relationship to the canon of Latin American fiction and on the intersection between his work and that of José Donoso, his Chilean Boom precursor.

Jorge Herralde, founder and director of Editorial Anagrama and Bolaño's editor since 1995 (when the writer submitted *Distant Star* for publication to that prestigious publishing house at the editor's request) has reconstructed Bolaño's editorial history, thereby illuminating the path that took the Chilean-born author to literary stardom and eventually to canonical status. The story begins with the manuscript of *Nazi Literature in the Americas*, which Herralde intended to publish but that Bolaño withdrew from consideration in order to honor a previous commitment to Seix Barral; and continues with a personal meeting between author and editor, the latter already impressed by the literary promise of the former (which editors at other prestigious publishing houses like Alfaguara and Plaza & Janés failed to recognize). The meeting marked the beginning of a long-standing relationship between author and editor that resulted in the

---

<sup>1</sup> These novels range from *Monsieur Pain* (written in 1981 but published with the title *La senda de los elefantes* in 1993) to *The Skating Rink* (1993), and include *Consejos de un discípulo de Morrison a un fanático de Joyce* (1984) and *The Third Reich* (published posthumously in 2010 but written in 1989). *Antwerp* (a “novel” published in 2002 but dating from 1980) was originally a poetic sequence eventually collected in *La universidad desconocida* (2007).

<sup>2</sup> The success of the marketing strategy (which included making Bolaño into a Kerouac/Che Guevara hybrid, and into a doomed writer struggling with ill health, poverty, exile, and even drug addiction in order to create literature) extends to the genre of the Hollywood blockbuster, as evidenced by the recent movie *Now You See Me*, where the character played by Woody Harrelson is shown reading *The Savage Detectives* after his arrest.

publication of Bolaño's subsequent books, including *The Savage Detectives* and the posthumous 2666. It was with the publication of the first of these in 1998, as Herralde states, that the Bolaño boom exploded and inaugurated a third stage in the author's editorial life (*Para Roberto Bolaño*, 41).<sup>3</sup> After winning the Herralde and Gallegos prizes in 1998 and 1999 respectively, this novel was quickly compared to Cortázar's *Hopscotch*, a watershed novel for a previous generation of Latin American readers. According to Herralde, with *The Savage Detectives* Bolaño became a model and hero for a new generation of Latin American authors, displacing many of the figures of the Boom from their formerly held central position. Ignacio Echevarría, Bolaño's most noted critic and a fictitious (and anonymous) character in the novel, subscribes to this opinion when he states that for the first time since the Boom Bolaño created a new paradigm of the writer in Latin America that made former types of authorial figures like Borges and García Márquez obsolete (Maristain, 198). And Jorge Volpi, who has called Bolaño the "last Latin American writer," dates Bolaño's canonization among his generational peers from the time of his last public appearance, which was at a literary congress held in Sevilla in June, 2003 (Maristain, 237).

But Bolaño's canonization is not just the product of a generational consensus, marketing strategies, or cultural politics. Many critics have carried out close readings of Bolaño's work and grounded the author's prominence on specific literary merits. For example, Roberto González Echevarría directly addresses the canonical status of Bolaño's fiction in an essay on *By Night in Chile*. The critic elaborates a subjective typology of canonical works –albeit one that he claims has general import—and shows how Bolaño's *Nocturno* fulfils each of the criteria. Canonical works treat elevated themes, display an awareness of their fictional condition through metatextual commentary, contain an undecipherable secret that may be at the origin itself of the text, recycle the literary tradition (but without Bloomian anxiety), and possess a clear sense of style (González Echevarría, 120-21). Bolaño's *Nocturno* treats important themes like death, religious faith, guilt, evil, and the literary calling; displays a constant awareness of its literary condition to the extent that the narrator is a well-known critic; includes enigmatic stories within the story that seem to be saying something about the work as a whole; establishes a dialogue with universal and national literature (Dante, St. Augustine, Neruda, Parra, Lafourcade, Lihn); and displays the kind of polished literary style that one would expect from a sophisticated reader and connoisseur of literature and philosophy. González Echevarría unambiguously affirms that *By Night in Chile* has secured itself a place in the canon of Latin American literature, and emphasizes the point by adding that Bolaño is a better novelist than José Donoso, his Chilean forerunner.

---

<sup>3</sup> The first two stages were the almost "clandestine" early publications of stories, poems, and novels in Spain, and the relative success of *Distant Star* and *Llamadas telefónicas*, the first two titles published by Anagrama. Bolaño's editorial life continued after the author's death, as implied above. The posthumous publication of other novels such as *The Third Reich* and *The Woes of the True Policeman* (both published by Anagrama after difficult negotiations with the representatives of Bolaño's widow) presumably constitutes a new stage in the author's editorial history, perhaps to be completed by the hypothetical future publication of Bolaño's correspondence.

Bolaño got more international exposure than Donoso ever did but that should not be taken as a value judgment on their relative literary worth.<sup>4</sup> And, as I will argue later, there is more in common between them than would appear at first sight. But before focusing on this issue, let us go back to one of the points González Echevarría makes about canonical works –their tendency to absorb and recycle tradition in original ways— and attempt to place Bolaño the novelist and short story writer as an heir of the Boom. Bolaño was well aware of the weight of tradition and actually defines great literature partially in terms of its canonical legacy: “... la gran literatura no es una cuestión de estilo ni de gramática... Es una cuestión de iluminación, tal como entiende Rimbaud esta palabra. Es una cuestión de videncia. Es decir, por un lado es una lectura lúcida y exhaustiva del árbol canónico y por otro lado es una bomba de relojería. Un testimonio (o una obra, como queramos llamarle) que explota en las manos de los lectores y que se proyecta hacia el futuro.” ” (“Dos hombres en el castillo...” ) The reception of tradition is conditioned, in this statement, by the explosive nature of the visionary work, the work resulting from a “lucid” reading of the canon. Bolaño’s definition lends itself to a dichotomous reading: *on the one hand* a bow toward tradition and *on the other* the call for an explosive break, which complicates the relation between the past and the future, the canon and the avant-garde art work, and whose synthetic resolution might well be the (under)mining of the canon. In fact, what we have here is a double dichotomy since Bolaño’s statement also implies an opposition between reading and writing, one which is more explicit in another comment by the author regarding his stance vis-à-vis the canon of Latin American fiction. When asked in a 1999 interview, “What is your relationship with writers from the Latin American Boom,” Bolaño responded: “Good, very good – as a reader, of course” (*Roberto Bolaño: The Last Interview*, 43), which leaves us wondering what his relation as a writer was to the likes of Vargas Llosa and García Márquez, whom he characterizes in that same passage as gigantic authors whose work is far superior to anything produced by the members of his own generation.

As a writer Bolaño had to actively deal with the great legacy of the Boom, and while many critics would agree that he ended up writing his own *Hopscotch*, few could explain what negotiations were necessary between what T.S. Eliot called the “historical sense” and the demands of the present and the future.<sup>5</sup> Jorge Volpi takes a step in that direction when he scripts a playful version of Bloom’s anxiety of influence to construct the relationship between Bolaño and his Boom precursors. Referring to the authors of the Boom, the Mexican author writes: “Bolaño los leyó de joven, los leyó de adulto y tal vez los hubiese releído de viejo: nombrándolos o sin nombrarlos, cada libro suyo intenta ser una respuesta, una salida, una bocanada de aire, una réplica, una refutación, un homenaje, un desafío o un insulto a todos

---

<sup>4</sup> Unlike Bolaño, Donoso never had one of his novels included in any of *The New York Times*’s Best Books lists, but at the height of postmodernism John Barth chose to exemplify the international postmodern style by referring to *A House in the Country* in one of his essays. See “Postmodernism Revisited,” 123-24.

<sup>5</sup> The most individual parts of a poet’s work, wrote Eliot, “may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously,” and he added that tradition involved a historical sense and, therefore, “the perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order.” (“Tradition and the Individual Talent”).

ellos" ("Bolaño, epidemia," 78). And he goes on to couch the relation between the successor and his precursors in terms of boxing and wrestling: "Cada mañana... Bolaño dedicaba un par de horas a prepararse para su lucha cotidiana con los autores del Boom. A veces se enfrentaba a Cortázar, al cual una vez llegó a vencer por nocaut en el último round; otras se abalanzaba contra el dúo de luchadores técnicos formado por Vargas Llosa y Fuentes; y, cuando se sentía particularmente poderoso o colérico o nostálgico, se permitía enfrentar al campeón mundial de los pesos pesados, el destripador de Aracataca, el rudo García Márquez, su némesis, su enemigo mortal y, aunque sorprenda a muchos... su único dios junto con ese dios todavía mayor, Borges (78). And he concludes: "Todas las mañanas pensaba cómo torcerle el pescuezo a uno o cómo aplicarle una llave maestra a otro de esos viejos que, en cambio, dolorosamente, nunca lo tomaron en cuenta o lo hicieron demasiado tarde."<sup>6</sup>

Harold Bloom spoils the festive metaphors used by Volpi by de-emphasizing the personal or psychological components of the struggle between successors and precursors. He points out that "influence anxiety, in literature, need not be an affect in the writer who arrives late in a tradition. It is always an anxiety *achieved* in a literary work, whether or not its author ever felt it." (*Anatomy of Influence*, 6).<sup>7</sup> And he adds that what matters for interpretation is the textual evidence, the revisionary relationship between works and especially, one would suppose, the hidden evidence of a struggle between precursors and latecomers that critics like Bloom himself can make evident by applying revisionary ratios to the reading of poems. If we view Bolaño's interaction with the canon of Latin American fiction as an intertextual dialogue, Borges's traces can easily be found in *Nazi Literature in the Americas* or in "The Insufferable Gaucho," an obvious rewriting of the Argentine master's most famous story, "El Sur;" just as Cortázar's imprint may be detected in the Auxilio Lacouture of *Amulet* (a reincarnation of la Maga) and in the *glíglíco* spoken by the character's poet friends when they want to leave her out of the conversation. We can also discover the ironic reference in the title of Bolaño's *Una novelita lumpen* to José Donoso's *Tres novelitas burguesas* (translated as *Sacred Families* in English) and, going further, deduce responses to García Márquez and Vargas Llosa, respectively, in the serial genealogy of María Expósitos (in *Woes of the True Policeman*) and in the extravagant duel between the writer and the critic in chapter 22 of *Los detectives salvajes*, which seems to emulate the Peruvian writer's early story "El desafío."

It seems doubtful that Bolaño wanted to be read as an avatar of Borges or Cortázar, though he recorded his "permanent" debt to both of them when he received the Rómulo Gallegos prize for *The Savage Detectives* in 1999 (see "About *The Savage Detectives*"). It is more likely that he invoked the names of his Argentine precursors not only out of sincere admiration for their work but also for reasons having to do with the reformulation of the canon that Bolaño carried out in the last few years of his life and that is well documented in *Between Parentheses*, the collection of essays, reviews, and occasional pieces that was originally published the year after the

<sup>6</sup> Fuentes excludes Bolaño from his last pronouncement on the Latin American novel (*La gran novela latinoamericana*) but Vargas Llosa has nothing but praise for *The Savage Detectives* and especially for its first one hundred pages.

<sup>7</sup> Cecilia Manzoni reads a certain passage of *Amulet* as a parody of Bloom's western canon in an article discussing the disarticulation and re-articulation of the canon in Bolaño's work ("Ficción de futuro y lucha por el canon...")

author's death. As the editor of that collection states, Bolaño projected from early on his proper place in the literary map (or in the literary field, as Bourdieu would have it), and he did it in a style picked up in the combative days when he was an unknown and rebellious poet in Mexico City—a style grounded on a regime of complicities and hostilities that is no longer in vogue—that later on in life got him mixed up in the sort of polemics that can damage a reputation (Maristain, 184).<sup>8</sup> Critics would agree, for example, that Bolaño's relationship with Borges is strategic in that it allowed the former to reform the canon from a secure position. At any rate, Bolaño's engagement with the canon is always passionate but devoid of anxiety. John Barth's definition of the ideal postmodern writer as one who "neither merely repudiates nor merely imitates either his twentieth-century modernist parents or his nineteenth-century premodernist grandparents" and who has "the first half of our century under his belt, but not on his back" ("The Literature of Replenishment," 203) discards any notion of anxiety and fits Bolaño well.

As we know, it was the publication of *The Savage Detectives* that put its author in the literary map. The novel is about the failed attempt by a band of bohemian poets to break into the cultural field, and about the search by their ringleaders for what is left of a once proud avant-garde tradition, a tradition now in tatters and incarnated in the unlikely figure of Cesárea Tinajero, the mother of Mexican visceral realism, who meets her death in a confusing roadside incident at the end. As a critic points out, not only literature but the literary institution play a major role in the novel. All the factors that underlie the autonomy of the literary field seem to fall within the purview of the various characters and narrative voices: "la función que le asignan a la literatura las instituciones y agentes culturales, las producciones simbólicas que dichas instituciones y agentes excluyen del circuito letrado, la relación que se establece entre quienes escriben y el aparato estatal, el público lector, el rol que juegan las revistas y los periódicos, los géneros literarios que se privilegian, el desempeño de la industria editorial y el mercado literario, [y] el papel que cumplen los críticos..." (Pastén, 425). The same critic argues that Bolaño's novel devalues literature just as much as it glorifies it, which is another way of saying that the novel was written by a reformed *infrarrealista* in whose discourse the avant-garde, the revolutionary dream, and the prospects of youth all blend together in a melancholy mix. Arturo Belano—the author's alter ego—gives up poetry, begins writing fiction and then turns to journalistic prose, and in the end gets lost in Africa, like his namesake Arthur Rimbaud, who chose the same fate and gave up writing poetry at the age of twenty. Or, as Bolaño would have it, *The Savage Detectives* is both an agony and a game, a reflection of a generational defeat as well as being the voice and joy of a generation ("Acerca de *Los detectives salvajes*," 327).

It is noteworthy that the novel that consecrated its author should be, to a large extent, about the failure to reach cultural status, but no more noteworthy than the centrality of poetry in a work that canonized a novelist. What is important here is not to analyze the balance between poetry and fiction in Bolaño's work nor to rehearse the arguments about the decline of poetry

---

<sup>8</sup> There may not be Bloomian *agon* in Bolaño but there certainly was a competitive streak streak that goes back to the author's early years in Spain when he depended on the earnings from literary contests to make ends meet and that comes out in the various pieces collected in *Between Parentheses*.

in the literary marketplace but to point out that Bolaño confronted the canon and, specifically the novels of the Boom, as a poet back in the 1970s. He himself admits that his readings of the Boom were from the perspective of a poet, and that if his reading had been from a narrator's perspective, he would have learned more about the internal structure of novels (*Roberto Bolaño: The Last Interview*, 44). Critics have often noted that Bolaño's novels tend to have a discontinuous structure and that even his short ones, like *Amulet* and *By Night in Chile*, can be broken down into a sequence of relatively self-contained stories that do form part of a larger narrative design but that could also stand alone and be included, for instance, in a collection of short stories by their author. One example among many others is the story of the Andalusian woman told in chapter 24 of *The Savage Detectives*, which corresponds to the story "Clara" in *Llamadas telefónicas*, Bolaño's first collection of short stories. These narrative pieces are moving parts that are dynamically recontextualized throughout the author's work, often crossing generic boundaries. Thus "The Worm" is a poem in *The Unknown University*, a story in *Llamadas telefónicas*, and a fleeting reference in *The Woes of the True Policeman* (pp. 225, 226). This is because the "large narrative design" in Bolaño's writing is not necessarily the individual novel but the author's work as a whole. In *Woes* there is a philosophical reflection that applies to Bolaño's entire literary project: "...the Whole is impossible, [and] knowledge is the classification of fragments" (196). The struggle to unify in a single vision the fragments of the imagination has a romantic lineage that survived Modernist poetry but came undone in postmodern theory and art. In Bolaño, however, the transmigration of motifs, the mixing of genres, and the poetic reading of fiction endow the author's work with an identity of its own. Not a finished identity but one always in search of itself, a project always in motion like the search for Cesárea Tinajero and for Archimboldi in 2666. No wonder then that Bolaño's critics have connected *The Savage Detectives* with Cortázar's *Hopscotch*, a notoriously discontinuous novel deeply in debt to Symbolist and Surrealist poetry and one in which all manner of "genres" (or languages) are mixed in the search for the center of the Mandala.

### *The Transparent Mystery of José Donoso.*

In a certain passage of *The Savage Detectives*, set in 1978, the narrating character records a conversation between herself and the night watchman of a roadside campsite, who is none other than Arturo Belano. They are talking about literature and the watchman says that "a novelist from the country I'm from lives here in Sitges and I visited him once." This novelist – who is obviously José Donoso – "seemed depressed and a little bit sick" and asked Belano "whether I had seen a film that was made in Mexico of one of his novels." Belano had seen it and liked it but hadn't read the book, which puts him in an uncomfortable position regarding the novelist's question. "I haven't read many novels," says the watchman, "but I have read lots of poetry." (230)<sup>9</sup>

Donoso, of course, is known as the premier Chilean novelist of the 20<sup>th</sup> century but Bolaño doesn't give him much credit for this, arguing that it is not a great feat to be regarded as an

---

<sup>9</sup> The book in question is *El lugar sin límites* (*Hell Has No Limits*). Arturo Ripstein's film version was released in 1977 (<http://cinemexicano.mty.itesm.mx/peliculas/lugar.html>).

important novelist in Chile: “To say that he’s the best Chilean novelist of the century is to insult him... To say that he’s among the century’s best writers in Spanish is an exaggeration... In the grand theater of Lezama, Bioy, Rulfo, Cortázar, García Márquez, Vargas Llosa, Sábato, Benet, Puig, Arenas, Donoso’s work automatically pales and takes second place” (“The Transparent Mystery of José Donoso,” 108-109). We may agree or disagree with this verdict but there is no doubt that Bolaño’s relation to Donoso’s legacy is uncomfortable. At the beginning of the “Mystery” piece Bolaño avows that it is hard for him to write about Donoso and later on he adds that Donoso’s legacy is “a dark room” where beasts fight. Bolaño only gives Donoso credit for three books: *Hell Has No Limits*, *The Obscene Bird of Night*, and *The Garden Next Door* but is far more severe with the “donositos,” the younger heirs of Donoso in Chile whose reading of “their master” is deficient and distorts his legacy. Bolaño radically sets himself apart from this crowd of disciples and, in the process, aggrandizes the figure of Donoso, who thus remains available for further reading and interpretation: “It would be better if they read him. It would be better if they stopped writing and starting reading instead.”

I indicated above that Bolaño’s *Una novelita lumpen* may be read as an ironic reference to Donoso’s *Tres novelitas burguesas*, and yet Bolaño doesn’t rewrite Donoso’s triptych as he rewrites Borges’s “El Sur.” What Bolaño likes about Donoso is his taste for losers but apparently he fails to connect with his forerunner on the imaginative level. There is no Bloomian “misprision” involved in the relationship. Yet there is a connection between Bolaño and Donoso that has not been noticed and, strangely enough, it has to do with the relevance of poetry in a literary universe ruled by fiction. It is well-known that the Poet is the central myth in Bolaño’s universe, and if we are looking for a characterization of the Poet that will fit Bolaño’s discourse, we will find it in Rimbaud’s “Lettre du Voyant” or in a brief text by Bolaño himself, in which he writes: “No one in the world is as brave as a poet. No one in the world faces disaster with more dignity and understanding... They work in the void of the word, like astronauts marooned on dead-end planets, in deserts where there are no readers or publishers... In the guild of writers they’re the greatest and least sought-after jewel. When some deluded kid decides at sixteen or seventeen to be a poet, it’s a guaranteed family tragedy... But their fragility is deceptive... Behind these shadowy fronts are probably the toughest people in the world, and definitely the bravest” (“The Best Gang,” 117-18).

Nowhere in his work does Donoso exalt the figure of the poet in terms similar to these but poets and poetic references do appear in his fiction and he himself is the author of a work of poetry, *Poemas de un novelista*, originally published in 1981. Bolaño fails to refer to this work, or to notice that even in *The Garden Next Door*—one of Donoso’s novels that he approves of—one of the central characters is a sort of postmodern reincarnation of Rimbaud. It is true that the figures of Poet and Novelist are not nearly as well fused in Donoso as they are in Bolaño, whose fiction often turns around the fortunes of poets. The title of Donoso’s poetic work is quite clear in this regard. These are the poems of a novelist and not of a poet, and should not be judged as the poems of an actual poet, which Bolaño was throughout his life, including his life as a novelist. More importantly, Bolaño’s prose is visionary in a way closer to poetry than to prose fiction. Nevertheless, Donoso’s incursions in the territory of poetry suggests a complicity between both authors that has so far remain unnoticed. The reference above to the “Donoso”

character in *The Savage Detectives* is almost ironic. The dialogue between the night watchman and the novelist takes place in Sitges, apparently in 1977. *Poemas de un novelista* includes a section entitled “Retratos (Sitges, 1977),” which leads us to speculate that while the watchman and the novelist were talking about *El lugar sin límites* in *The Savage Detectives*, Donoso was actually writing poems in the same place and at the same time.

Sitges is also the location where the protagonists of *The Garden Next Door* are trapped along with various other Latin American political exiles from the Southern Cone and the hordes of tourists that each summer descend on the Spanish Costa Brava. Julio Méndez and his wife Gloria have an opportunity to get away from the “hell of Sitges” when a wealthy friend offers them his apartment in Madrid for the summer so that Julio may continue working on his novel and Gloria dedicate her time to her translations and occasional articles. *The Garden Next Door* is the story of a failed writer and of the anxious rewriting of a failed novel, which is obviously not the case of *The Garden Next Door* itself but of the aborted avatars it contains in a scheme of mise-en-abime reflections. At the end of the novel, the couple moves back to Sitges and Gloria is revealed to be the actual author of Donoso’s novel while Julio, the putative author, morphs into a modest literature professor at the Autonomous University of Barcelona.

The uncanny parallel between Sitges and Blanes –Bolaño’s location on the Costa Brava—is not the only link connecting Bolaño and Donoso in *The Garden Next Door*. The theme of exile or expatriation is another such link but there is also a more radical connection between both authors having to do with the very ground of literature.<sup>10</sup> If for Bolaño the poet is the central literary myth of modernity (and Rimbaud its most perfect incarnation), for the narrator of Donoso’s novel “a writer is endowed with a superior aura” (116). The mythical authorial figure in *The Garden Next Door* is Marcelo Chiriboga, “the most insultingly famous member of the dubious Boom” (117) and a sort of metonymy of García Márquez. Chiriboga’s mystique includes mastering the secrets of literary creation but also being “on close terms with the Pope, Brigitte Bardot, Fidel Castro, Caroline of Monaco, [and] García Márquez (117-118). In the novel’s central scene, set in an antiques shop where mirrors proliferate and dazzle the casual onlooker, this tropical media star appears surrounded by rare silver objects possessing that unique aura that, according to Walter Benjamin, has been corroded by mechanical reproduction. The halo of cultural refinement and priceless value bathes in its splendor not only the narrator’s literary idol but also Bijou, the character who in the novel embodies the figure of Rimbaud: “I’m aware of Bijou’s odor of sweat at my side, his corrupt Rimbaudian presence: bad teeth, fingernails bitten down... In the mirror of the shop window I see his halo of blond hair superimposed on the costly silver objects inside, and next to it our own poor, ragged, vulgar reflections... All of a sudden my eyes zoom past Rimbaud’s reflection... in the window, to rest my gaze on someone I recognize at the back of the shop...” (116-117).

---

<sup>10</sup> The question of the canon is also a powerful connection. If Bolaño had read the Boom authors without anxiety, Donoso confronts them in this novel (and to some extent in his personal history of the Boom) with nothing but anxiety.



I am not suggesting that the aura of the poet in Bolaño's discourse is comparable to the aura of the "writer" in Donoso's novel. For one thing, the writer is specifically a novelist and not a poet in Donoso; for another, Bolaño denies his poet the luminosity traditionally associated with aura when he refers to the "shadowy fronts" of poets behind which hide the toughest and bravest personalities. More importantly, Chiriboga's aura (in the original sense of a pure image) is to some extent degraded by its transformation into the false aura of celebrities in an age of media supremacy, while Bijou's halo—despite being superimposed on costly silver objects—recalls Baudelaire's "Perte d'auréole," in which the angel-poet drops his halo in the mire of the macadam and can walk about the city and "commit foul acts" without being singled out.

Yet the invocation of Rimbaud in *The Garden Next Door* should not go unnoticed. Bijou, who in the novel is both a corrupt Rimbaudian figure and an *angelo musicante*, is Julio Méndez's desired alter ego, and a presence as troubling to him as Tadzio is to Aschenbach in Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*. Bijou in fact is a combination of Rimbaud and Mann's (and Visconti's) golden youth. But which Rimbaud? Not the visionary rebel who in the "Lettre du Voyant" writes that the poet must make himself a seer by a derangement of the senses and by experiencing all forms of love, suffering, and madness so that he might reach the unknown—this would be Bolaño's Rimbaud—but the one who in the same letter writes: "Je est un autre." Donoso's dramatized and failed author is constantly looking to exchange identities with another as a means of liberating himself from the moral restrictions imposed by his bourgeois background and redeeming himself from his literary failure. His moral decadence (he steals a painting and passes it as his own) is reflected in Bijou's moral "corruption"<sup>11</sup>—a reflection that makes identity possible—but Bijou also holds the key to an aesthetic sublimation that would neutralize the ethical imperatives repressing Julio's artistic creativity.

The Rimbaud figure recurs in *Curfew*, Donoso's 1986 novel that is squarely set in dictatorial Chile. The novel is to a large extent a homage to Pablo Neruda—whom Donoso read compulsively in his youth—if not part itself of Neruda's legacy in Chilean literature.<sup>12</sup> The story takes place over the twenty-four hours that pass between the wake of Matilde Urrutia—the poet's third and final wife—and her funeral in Santiago's General Cemetery. The first part ("Evening") takes place in the widow's house where a motley cast of characters congregate to say their last goodbye. Among them are the two main protagonists of the novel: Judit Torre, a beautiful bourgeois intellectual who militates in the resistance against Pinochet, and Mañungo Vera, an internationally famous folk singer (probably modelled after Víctor Jara) who returns to Chile after thirteen years abroad to confront national reality. A third protagonist is Lopito, a failed poète maudit who recites Rimbaud and whose past includes a stint with the MIR, the radical left-wing group that was ruthlessly persecuted after the fall of Allende. This is the trio of characters around whom the story is built and whose interaction is developed in the two other parts of the novel: "Night," and "Morning." Lopito is a former lover of Judit and a former close

---

<sup>11</sup> In the "Lettre du Voyant" Rimbaud writes that the poet "becomes among all men the great patient, the great criminal, the one accursed."

<sup>12</sup> Bolaño's fixation with Neruda is compellingly recorded in "Dance Card," one of the texts included in *Last Evenings on Earth*. Neruda's work—in a poetic and material sense—is part of Bolaño's family legacy.

friend of Mañungo's. Both Mañungo and Judit lead inauthentic lives that are redeemed by Lopito's sacrifice at the end of the novel. Mañungo, because he represents a cause in which he scarcely believes but that redounds in his celebrity status abroad; Judit, because she never confesses to her former cellmates that she was not raped in prison on account of her social standing and refined looks. Lopito's death at the hands of the police brings both identity crises to a resolution. Mañungo chooses to stay in Chile and makes a definitive political commitment whereas Judit reaffirms her revolutionary identity.

As in *The Garden Next Door*, Donoso's Rimbaldian figure in *Curfew* is not endowed with any sort of visionary powers. His role, once again, is to serve as a symbolic counterpoint to some other protagonist of the novel –or *imaginary* counterpoint, to be more precise, since the projective relationships between Bijou and Julio in *The Garden Next Door*<sup>13</sup> and between Lopito and Mañungo in *Curfew* take place in the order of the (Lacanian) Imaginary and corrects the prescriptions of the Symbolic. Lopito is Mañungo's "low Other," a figure that Stallybrass and White inscribe in a recurrent social dialectic between high discourses (those of literature, philosophy, statecraft, and the languages of Church and University) and their low counterparts (the discourses of the peasantry, the urban poor, the colonized, the marginal, the lumpen): "A recurrent pattern emerges: the 'top' attempts to reject and eliminate the 'bottom' for reasons of prestige and status, only to discover, not only that it is in some way frequently dependent upon that low-Other . . . , but also that the top includes that low symbolically, as a primary eroticized constituent of its own fantasy life. The result is a mobile, conflictual fusion of power, fear and desire in the construction of subjectivity: a psychological dependence upon precisely those Others which are being rigorously opposed and excluded at the social level" (5-6).<sup>14</sup>

Lopito is the very incarnation of the abject and repulsive. References to his green teeth, ugliness, grime, and drunkenness proliferate through the novel. (Not surprisingly, he is given to fits of reading *Le Bateau ivre* aloud at the strangest times). More pathetically, his 6-year old daughter Lopita is described in somewhat similar terms: "Lopita was a little monster with leaden feet, an insistent, troublesome little girl, who opened herself to general mockery because she was ugly, clumsy, and ridiculous" (274). Lopito provokes a policeman at the end in defense of his little girl, and his ensuing death provides symbolic closure to the lives of the other main characters. Mañungo, in particular, "incorporates" the features of his low Other in shaping his newfound sense of identity, and reconciles himself with his modest provincial origins in the remote island of Chiloé, whose folklore is an integral part of Donoso's textual repertoire. Lopito is a failed Rimbaud to the same extent that Julio Méndez, in *The Garden Next Door*, is a failed García Márquez or, indeed, a failed José Donoso.

Bolaño starts his brief piece on Donoso recording his incredulity and disapproval of something he heard regarding Donoso's death, namely, that the dying novelist asked to have Huidobro's *Altazor* read to him in his last moments. Bolaño's objection to Donoso's last wish (if that was

---

<sup>13</sup> Notice the almost anagrammatical relationship between the characters's names, which brings to mind Rimbaud's "Voyelles."

<sup>14</sup> El Quemado, in Bolaño's *Third Reich*, comes close to being a "low Other" character along the lines of Lopito.

indeed the case) is what it says about the writing life and the national essence: "I don't have anything against Huidobro, I like Huidobro, but how can a dying man ask to be read that poem? I don't understand it..., as if Donoso were a mirror in which the essence of Chile and the essence of the writing life were reflected, and that double image, throbbing with sickness, superficiality, and indulgence, just makes me sad..." ("Transparent Mystery...", 107) Actually, Bolaño didn't like Huidobro (or *Altazor*) that much, as we may infer from comments he made in an interview with Mónica Maristain: "Huidobro bores me a little. Too much trilling and tra-la-laling, too much of the parachutist who sings Tyrolese songs as he falls. Better the parachutist who plummets in flames, or the parachutist whose parachute simply never opens" ("The End," 358). Huidobro, a canonical avant-garde poet, is one of the victims of Bolaño's reformulation of the canon, since Bolaño would relegate him to a secondary place in favor of César Vallejo, the Mexican *estridentistas* and, ironically, Juan Emar, a fairly neglected Chilean avant-garde writer, painter, and art critic whose real name was Álvaro Yáñez and who was related to José Donoso through the maternal branch of the latter's family. "Juan Emar" was also a friend of Huidobro's and possibly the model for the forgotten avant-garde painter Larco in Donoso's *Still Life with Pipe*. In this *nouvelle* the alcoholic Larco has withdrawn from the world in order to reject those who rejected him and passes himself as the curator of a run-down museum that houses the complete collection of Larco paintings.<sup>15</sup> He dies chanting "Art isn't worth a fart" but before dying performs one last transgressive act (involving one of his own paintings) on behalf of a newfound admirer. Though not a poet, Larco is the closest approximation in Donoso's fiction to the visionary poète maudit who holds such a central place in Bolaño's literary system.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY.

Barth, John. "The Literature of Replenishment." *The Friday Book*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1984.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Postmodernism Revisited." *Further Fridays*. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1995.

Bloom, Harold. *The Anatomy of Influence: Literature As A Way Of Life*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011.

Bolaño, Roberto. "About *The Savage Detectives*." *Between Parentheses*. Tr. Natasha Wimmer. New York: New Directions, 2011.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Dos hombres en el castillo: una conversación electrónica sobre Philip K. Dick." *Letras libres* 9 (Junio 2002) <<http://www.letraslibres.com/revista/convivio/dos-hombres-en-el-castillouna-conversacion-electronica-sobre-philip-k-dick>>

\_\_\_\_\_. "The End: 'Distant Star.'" *Between Parentheses*.

\_\_\_\_\_. "The Best Gang." *Between Parentheses*.

\_\_\_\_\_. "The Transparent Mystery of José Donoso." *Between Parentheses*.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Savage Detectives*. Tr. Natasha Wimmer. New York: Farrar, Straus and

<sup>15</sup> The museum is in Cartagena, Chile, a popular beach resort near Santiago where Huidobro died in 1948.

Giroux, 2007.

Donoso, José. *Curfew*. Tr. Alfred MacAdam. New York: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1988.  
 \_\_\_\_\_. *The Garden Next Door*. Tr. Hardie St. Martin. New York: Grove Press, 1992.  
 \_\_\_\_\_. *Poemas de un novelista*. Madrid: Bartleby Editores, 2009.  
 \_\_\_\_\_. *Taratuta and Still Life with Pipe*. Tr. Gregory Rabassa. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1993.

Eliot. T.S. "Tradition and the Individual Talent." *The Sacred Wood*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1921.

Gonzalez Echevarría, Roberto. "Nocturno de Chile y el canon." *Acta Literaria* 41 (2010): 117-28.

Herralde, Jorge. *Para Roberto Bolaño*. Santiago: Catalonia, 2005.

Maristain, Mónica. *El hijo de Mister Playa: una semblanza de Roberto Bolaño*. México: Editorial Almadía, 2012.

Pastén, J. Agustín. "De la institucionalización a la disolución de la literatura en *Los detectives salvajes*, de Roberto Bolaño." *Revista Canadiense de Estudios Hispánicos* 33, 2 (2009): 423-46.

Pollack, Sarah. "Latin America Translated (Again): Roberto Bolaño's *The Savage Detectives* in the United States." *Comparative Literature*, 2009 Summer; 61 (3): 346-65.

*Roberto Bolaño: The Last Interview & Other Conversations*. New York: Melville House Publishing, 2009.

Stallybrass, Peter & Allon White. *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1986.

Volpi, Jorge. "Bolaño, epidemia."  
<http://www.revistadelauniversidad.unam.mx/4908/4908/pdf/49volpi.pdf>