Chapter 7

Literature and Proportion in The Insufferable Gaucho

Brett Levinson

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

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

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

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

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