

# The Great Bolaño

Francisco Goldman

1.

"A writer's patria or country, as someone said, is his language. That sounds pretty demagogic, but I completely agree with him...." That is from Roberto Bolaño's acceptance speech for the 1999 Rómulo Gallegos Prize, an award given by the government of Venezuela for the best Spanish-language novel of the year in Latin America or Spain. Bolaño won the prize for *The Savage Detectives*, his sprawling, exuberant account of two Latin American poets over twenty-some years, which made him a literary celebrity and established him as one of the most talented and inventive novelists writing in Spanish. Bolaño was routinely asked in interviews whether he considered himself Chilean, having been born in Santiago in 1953, or Spanish, having lived in Spain the last two decades of his life, until his death in 2003, or Mexican, having lived in Mexico City for ten years in between. One time he answered, "I'm Latin American." Other times he would say that the Spanish language was his country.

"Although I also know," he continued in his acceptance speech,

that it's true that a writer's country isn't his language or isn't only his language.... There can be many countries, it occurs to me now, but only one passport, and obviously that passport is the quality of the writing. Which doesn't mean just to write well, because anybody can do that, but to write marvelously well, though not even that, because anybody can do that too. Then what is writing of quality? Well, what it's always been: to know how to thrust your head into the darkness, know how to leap into the void, and to understand that literature is basically a dangerous calling.

The inseparable dangers of life and literature, and the relationship of life to literature, were the constant themes of Bolaño's writings and also of his life, as he defiantly and even improbably chose to live it. By the end of that life, Bolaño had written three story collections and ten novels. The last of these novels, *2666*, was not quite finished when he died of liver failure in 2003, which did not prevent many readers and critics from considering it his masterwork. It is an often shockingly raunchy and violent tour de force (though the phrase seems hardly adequate to describe the novel's narrative velocity, polyphonic range, inventiveness, and bravery) based in part on the still unsolved murders of hundreds of women in Ciudad Juárez, in the Sonora desert of Mexico near the Texas border. (*2666* is currently being translated into English and is due to be published next year by Farrar, Straus and Giroux.)

Yet the writer with whom Spanish-language critics have often compared Bolaño is the Argentine Jorge Luis Borges, renowned for his singular bookishness, and for the metaphysical playfulness, erudition, and brevity of



Roberto Bolaño

## BOOKS DISCUSSED IN THIS REVIEW

### **The Savage Detectives**

by Roberto Bolaño,  
translated from the Spanish by  
Natasha Wimmer.  
Farrar, Straus and Giroux,  
577 pp., \$27.00

### **Last Evenings on Earth**

by Roberto Bolaño,  
translated from the Spanish by  
Chris Andrews.  
New Directions,  
219 pp., \$13.95 (paper)

### **Distant Star**

by Roberto Bolaño,  
translated from the Spanish by  
Chris Andrews.  
New Directions,  
149 pp., \$14.95 (paper)

### **2666**

by Roberto Bolaño.  
Barcelona: Anagrama, 1,125 pp.  
(to be published in English  
translation by Farrar, Straus and  
Giroux next year)

his entirely asexual writings. With those comparisons critics have wanted, partly, to emphasize their sense of Bolaño's significance, for Borges is probably the only Latin American writer of the past century whose greatness seems uncontested by anybody, though the more you read Bolaño, the more interesting and appropriate the comparison between the two writers becomes. Bolaño revered Borges ("I could live under a table reading Borges"). He would have been happy, Bolaño told an interviewer, to have led a life like Borges's—relatively sedentary, devoted to literature and a small circle of like-minded friends, "a happy life." But Bolaño lived most of his life in another

manner. "My life," he said, "has been infinitely more savage than Borges's."

Bolaño was born in Santiago, Chile, but spent his childhood in a provincial town south of the capital. His father was a truck driver and boxer, his mother a schoolteacher; in 1968, in search of a new start, they moved to Mexico City along with Roberto and his sister. That was the year government troops occupied the vast campus of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) and massacred hundreds of student protesters at the Tlatelolco Plaza. But Mexico City seemed to the adolescent Bolaño "like a planet apart, the city where every-

thing was possible." Within a year of arriving, he'd decided to be a poet and dropped out of school; later he would blame gaps in his subsequent self-education on the layout of the shelving in bookstores that prevented him from shoplifting certain books.

In 1973, aged nineteen, a self-described Trotskyite, Bolaño set out for Chile, where the Socialist Salvador Allende had been elected president. He mostly traveled by bus, a journey comparable to the one sentimentally depicted in the recent movie about the young Che Guevara, *The Motorcycle Diaries*, except Bolaño traveled through a continent much influenced by Guevara's now mythologized life and death. In El Salvador, Bolaño stayed with future leftist FMLN guerrilla leaders, the same men, "authentic criminals who called themselves poets," who two years later would murder the leftist poet and free spirit Roque Dalton in his sleep. Bolaño arrived in Chile not long before September 11, 1973, when the Chilean military, led by General Augusto Pinochet, overthrew Allende, who died, probably by suicide, during the coup. Supporters of the Allende government and many young innocents were arrested; thousands were "disappeared." Bolaño spent eight days in prison until, recognized by two guards who were former schoolmates, he was freed.

He returned to Mexico City and, as he put it, "dedicated myself to writing with my aura of a war veteran." In 1974, the poet Mario Santiago brought a group of friends who'd been expelled from an UNAM poetry workshop—they'd tried to force the resignation of a poet-professor unwilling, or unable, to teach Spanish Golden Age poetry of the sixteenth century and classical poetic forms—to visit his friend Roberto Bolaño, who lived in an apartment in the center of town. (Mario Santiago would be the model, in *The Savage Detectives*, for Ulises Lima, best friend of Bolaño's fictional alter ego, Arturo Belano.) At that meeting Bolaño came up with the idea of forming a poetry movement "against the official culture," which he named the *Movimiento Infrarrealista de Poesía*. The Infrarealists' obvious heroes were the Beats, Dadaists, *maudits* such as Rimbaud and Lautréamont ("the two absolute adolescent poets"), and also more obscure figures, such as their "adored Sophie Podolski," a Belgian poet who'd committed suicide in 1974 at age twenty.

Their declared enemy was the poet and intellectual Octavio Paz, in their eyes the representative of Mexico's "official culture," the politically powerful gatekeeper to the Mexican literary establishment. Infrarealists interrupted Paz's public readings with shouts and once, supposedly, threw wine on his shirt.

Bolaño's Infrarealist manifesto is one of his earliest writings available to readers.<sup>1</sup> Titled "Déjenlo Todo, Nue-

<sup>1</sup>It can be read in Spanish on the *Movimiento Infrarrealista de Poesía* Web site, [www.infrarrealismo.com](http://www.infrarrealismo.com), which has been in existence since 2005.

vamente" (meaning, "Leave Everything Behind, Again," after a poem by André Breton), the manifesto is a free-associative, exuberant verbal torrent—"Dancing-club of Misery. Pepito Tequila sobbing his love for Lisa Underground.... Rimbaud, come home!" Rather than prescribing any particular aesthetic principles or commitments, it urges *infrarrealistas* to leave their narrow bookish circles, see the world, and find their rebel poetry in their own uncompromising lives. Some of its exhortations, such as the twice-repeated "The poem is a journey, and the poet is a hero who reveals heroes," seem especially striking in light of Bolaño's mature novels, which would repeatedly describe the fateful journeys of poets. In at least three of those novels, *Distant Star*, *The Savage Detectives*, and *2666*, the central plot would involve a literal search by "detective" poets (or literary types) for mysterious or vanished poet-writers, some of them heroes, some villains.

In Mexico City in 1976, Bolaño published his first book, a twenty-two-page collection of poetry, *Reinventando el Amor*. A year later he moved to Spain, settling for a time in Barcelona. Soon after, *Muchachos desnudos bajo el arcoiris de fuego* (Naked Boys under the Rainbow of Fire), his anthology of eleven young Latin American poets, including himself and Santiago, was published in Mexico. A short novel, co-written with Antoni G. Porta, *Consejos de un discípulo de Morrison a un fanático de Joyce* (A [Jim] Morrison Fan's Advice to a Joyce Fan), won a minor prize in 1984. Then, for the next decade, Bolaño the writer virtually disappeared. Throughout those years, he supported himself in a variety of low-wage jobs, among them working as the night watchman in a campground just outside Barcelona; eventually he settled in Blanes, a small seaside town north of Barcelona.

Bolaño always considered himself, above all, a poet. But in 1990, when he and his companion, Carolina López, had a son, Lautaro, Bolaño realized that he was now responsible for a family. He was impoverished, a South American foreigner; as a poet he could hardly have been more obscure. Bolaño made the improbable decision to support his new family by becoming a fiction writer. On the advice of a friend, he found a clever, if barely workable, way of doing so—entering provincial literary contests. In 1993 his short novel *La Pista de Hielo* (The Ice Rink) won such a prize. *La Pista de Hielo* involves the discovery of a mysterious naked corpse, which turns out to belong to a poet.

A year later the short novel *Monsieur Pain*, whose main character looks after the great Peruvian poet Cesar Vallejo on his Paris deathbed, won a prize sponsored by the city of Toledo. His next novel was *La Literatura Nazi en America*, an "encyclopedia"—in the spirit of Borges's *Universal History of Infamy*—of imaginary ultrarightist South and North American writers.<sup>2</sup> Jorge Herralde, owner-editor of the prestigious publishing house Anagrama, was interested in publishing it, but as Bolaño was too poor to

own a telephone, Herralde was unable to contact him until the novel had already been sold, for a pittance, to another publisher, which soon let it go out of print.

But Anagrama published Bolaño's next novel, *Distant Star*, in 1996, and went on to publish at least one of his books every year for the rest of his life: two story collections, four short novels, and a book of essays and reviews. During those last five years Bolaño also worked steadily on the monumental *2666*. From 1993 on he knew he was gravely ill, suffering from several medical conditions including the liver ailment that caused his death in 2003.

## 2.

Latin America is the insane asylum of Europe. Maybe, originally, it was thought that Latin America would be Europe's hospital, or Europe's grain bin. But now it's the insane asylum. A savage, impoverished, violent insane asylum, where, despite its chaos and corruption, if you open your eyes wide, you can see the shadow of the Louvre.

—Roberto Bolaño,  
*Bolaño por sí mismo*<sup>3</sup>

According to the narrator of "Mauricio ('The Eye') Silva," one of Bolaño's stories collected in *Last Evenings on Earth*, "violence, real violence, is unavoidable, at least for those of us who were born in Latin America during the fifties and were about twenty years old at the time of Salvador Allende's death." But the story that The Eye, a homosexual photographer, reveals to the narrator, his fellow Chilean exile in Europe, is a ludicrous one: on a trip to India The Eye rescued two young boys, one a eunuch, from a brothel and ran away with them to another village where he diligently tried to raise them until, after a year and a half, both died of disease.

When the story ends, with The Eye sobbing away, it's difficult to grasp the connection—asserted by both The Eye and the narrator—to "the violence that will not let us be. The lot of Latin Americans born in the Fifties," and to "those who fought for Salvador Allende and those who were too scared to fight." It's as if Bolaño is satirizing the routine self-pity of exile. Yet the story's mood of nearly inexpressible and lonely grief leaves you with an intuitive sense of its truthfulness, which seems something other than a literal truthfulness.

The story is written in the unadorned voice typical of Bolaño's shorter fictions, direct and intimate but also detached. That voice is perfectly evoked early in the novel *Distant Star*, when the narrator reflects about a friend, "I guess he talked the way we all do now, those of us who are still alive (he talked as if he were living inside a cloud)." Chris Andrews, who translates the Bolaño books that New Directions publishes, always gives a convincing rendering of that voice.

In his novel *The Savage Detectives*, Bolaño offers another "instructive"

<sup>3</sup>Bolaño wrote out all his responses in interviews, which have been collected in one volume, *Bolaño por sí mismo* (Santiago: Universidad Diego Portales, 2006).

<sup>2</sup>*Nazi Literature in the Americas* will be published in the US in early 2008 by New Directions.

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story about his generation: this one, told by Arturo Belano to a friend of his, is about two writers he has known: a Peruvian and a Cuban, "a poet and a storyteller," who "believed in the revolution and freedom, like pretty much every Latin American writer born in the fifties." Both enjoyed early literary success, but "the same thing happened to them that almost always happens to the best Latin American writers or the best of the writers born in the Fifties: the trinity of youth, love, and death was revealed to them, like an epiphany." The Peruvian, while living in Paris, fell in with Peruvian Maoists, and because he'd always been "a playful and irresponsible Maoist," found himself writing "pages of revolting propaganda"; despite his youthful folly, he was "still a good poet, occasionally very good." When he returned to Peru to live cheaply and write, he was denounced as a "revisionist or a traitorous dog" by the Shining Path guerrillas, while the police considered him one of the guerrillas' ideologues. Either side might kill him. "To make a long story short: the Peruvian came unglued."

The gay Cuban writer "was dragged through the shit and madness that passes for a revolution." He lost his job, was barred from publishing in Cuba, imprisoned, and after years of suffering, made it to the United States, where he contracted AIDS and died. (He is clearly modeled on the Cuban writer Reinaldo Arenas.) "Sometimes he would sit at a window of his New York apartment and think about what he could have done and what, in the end, he did. His last days were days of loneliness, suffering, and rage at what he had lost forever."

His generation's journey to disillusionment provided Bolaño with a surprisingly original subject, at least within contemporary Latin American literature.

With Bolaño we are far from the way that the most famous generation of Latin American novelists and poets—Gabriel García Márquez, Mario Vargas Llosa, Pablo Neruda, Octavio Paz, and others—understood the long-standing and dreadful Latin American problem of literature and politics. During Latin America's violent decades of cold war upheaval, those older writers often used the pulpits of their fame to champion one side or another. Yet in their novels and, with the exception of Neruda, in their poems, they attempted a nondidactic art that "transcended" immediate political realities. The young García Márquez, in a 1960 essay asking "Why are all the novels about *la violencia* so bad?" had admonished writers for writing too directly about violent acts, and for forgetting that "a novel is not found in the dead... but in the living, sweating ice in their hiding places."

In García Márquez's writings, wrote Vargas Llosa in 1971, the "social and political theme, although essential to those fictions... appears in an oblique manner."<sup>4</sup> (The famous scene of the massacre of the banana plantation workers in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* passes like a brief hallucination

within the spectacular whirl of that novel, yet we never doubt García Márquez's political sympathies with them.) Such a novelist, wrote Vargas Llosa, declares war on mundane reality and attempts to supplant it: "To write novels is an act of rebellion against reality.... Every novel is a secret deicide, is a symbolic assassin of reality."<sup>5</sup>

Bolaño did write about political violence directly, though in a way that couldn't have been further from the literature of "denunciation" that García Márquez condemned. He even claimed that violence functioned in his writings "in an accidental way, which is how violence functions everywhere."

*Distant Star* tells the story of Carlos Wieder, an assassin not of "reality," but of young female poets. Wieder, a



The young Infrarealist poets in Chapultepec Park, Mexico City, 1976. Roberto Bolaño is in the back row, second from right; Mario Santiago is at the top left.

mediocre poet himself, is enrolled in a poetry workshop along with the unnamed narrator and other students, including the gifted twin sisters Veronica and Angelica Garmendia. When Pinochet's coup occurs, the students scatter and disappear (some forever). Wieder tracks the Garmendias to a family country house, where they spend a night reciting poetry and talking, as the narrator imagines it, about the leftist intellectual and poet "Enrique Lihn and 'civil poetry,' and here if the twins were more attentive they would have seen an ironic glint in [Wieder's] eye (civil poetry, I'll give you civil poetry)." In the middle of the night, Wieder murders the sleeping aunt in her bed; minutes later four men arrive at the house in a car and Wieder lets them in. We are left to imagine on our own precisely what the men do in the house, but the outcome is clear:

And the bodies will never be found; but no, *one* body, just one, will appear years later in a mass grave, the body of Angelica Garmendia, my adorable, my incomparable Angelica, but only hers, as if to prove that Carlos Wieder is a man and not a god.

Wieder works for the Pinochet regime as an air force pilot (he collaborates with Pinochet's death squads on

<sup>5</sup>The Boom era writers produced formidable novels that described political violence more directly, but typically these were historical novels, such as Vargas Llosa's ferocious *The War of the End of the World*, which Bolaño admired, or the famous "dictator" novels.

some of his murders, but it's not entirely clear to what extent they are part of his official duties). In the air force he finds a way to revive his career as a poet: he skywrites his poems over the Andes. He is hailed, particularly by supporters of the new regime, as "the era's major poet" for his gnomic verse in the sky. ("Death is responsibility.... Death is love....") Later Wieder vanishes, and the narrator, now in Spain, tries to follow his elusive trail across decades.

An exiled Chilean detective enters the story, hired by a mysterious benefactor. The detective pays the narrator, with his knowledge of poetry, to look for signs of Wieder in obscure literary magazines with names like *Hibernia* and *Mr. Pete*. Or might Wieder belong to the Parisian sect of "barbaric writ-

novels, it is as expansive as his two Chilean novels of literature and evil (*Distant Star* and *By Night in Chile*) are slender. Bolaño's friends often joked that he wouldn't allow anybody to say anything good about Chile, or bad about Mexico. As his friend Carmen Boullosa has observed, he regarded Chile as the inferno of his youth, and Mexico as the paradise (though later, in his last book, the inferno came to Mexico too). Yet he never returned to Mexico after leaving it in 1977. "From a great distance," wrote another friend, the Mexican writer Juan Villoro, "he had constructed a country of memory, of spectral exactitude."<sup>6</sup>

This is the way. *The Savage Detectives* begins, in the year 1975:

#### November 2

I've been cordially invited to join the visceral realists. I accepted, of course. There was no initiation ceremony. It was better that way.

#### November 3

I'm not really sure what visceral realism is.

Juan García Madero, the seventeen-year-old narrator of the diary that makes up the novel's 124-page first section, titled "Mexicans Lost in Mexico," is an orphan who lives with his middle-class aunt and uncle, a law student enrolled in a poetry workshop at the university. He knows what a *rispetto* is (an Italian form of verse composed of eight lines with eleven syllables each), but the workshop teacher does not. ("The only Mexican poet who knows things like that by heart is Octavio Paz (our great enemy)," writes García Madero, "the others are clueless, or at least that's what Ulises Lima told me minutes after I joined the visceral realists.") In class, García Madero challenges the teacher's knowledge of poetic forms. The professor responds, "Don't give me this crap." In the original Spanish, he snarls, "*No me vengas con chingaderas, García Madero.*" (Almost literally, "stop fucking around with me," but also "don't be such a fucking smart-ass," though *chingar* is such a common and versatile Mexican verb that few would be shocked to hear a professor use it in a classroom; behind the irate complaint, you also hear his chagrin.)

*The Savage Detectives* is not only Bolaño's "spectral" recreation of the Mexico City of his youth, but also makes uncanny use of the city's exuberantly baroque vernacular, a mix of traditional slang and that of several subcultures (adolescent, low-life, hipster-druggo, snippy upper-class bohemians, and so on). Throughout the multi-voiced epic of *The Savage Detectives*, the gifted translator Natasha Wimmer is almost always up to the task, but it must also be said that it is probably impossible to make Mexican Spanish sound like Mexican English. (They have *chingaderas* and we have crap.)

<sup>6</sup>From the prologue to *Bolaño por sí mismo*.

<sup>7</sup>As intentionally juvenile as the visceral realists' hostile fixation with Paz can seem, Bolaño—for whom Nicanor Parra was the greatest contemporary poet—did not admire his poetry, though he did say that he considered Paz's prose superior to Carlos Fuentes's.

*The Savage Detectives* is Roberto Bolaño's double self-portrait of the poet as a young man. The Chilean Arturo Belano—who with his friend Ulises Lima leads the visceral realist poets—has already had a revelation of “the trinity of youth, love and death”; the book will follow him through his years in Spain, up to 1996, when, already seriously ill, he disappears into war-torn Africa, apparently in search of a Rimbaud-like oblivion, or even death. But the narrator García Madero is the poet in his moment of adolescent rebellion and excitement, who believes that the poet's life, the only life worth living, will be one of limitless adventure and epiphany. He drops out of school, leaves home, assembles an ever-growing library of shoplifted books, and soon there is no turning back from his journey of discovery: of poetry and poets, of the city (“I drift from place to place like a piece of flotsam”), and, most of all, of love and sex, for García Madero's awakening sexual energies seem inexhaustible, promising as much possibility and danger as the city itself.

At the end of the book's first section, on New Year's Eve, García Madero, Arturo Belano, Ulises Lima, and a waifish imp of a prostitute known as Lupe leave Mexico City in a white Impala, fleeing Lupe's jealous, violent pimp. They are headed to the Sonoran desert in search of the object of Lima and Belano's obsession: a long-forgotten, never more than obscure poet named Cesárea Tinajera, one of the original stridentists—an actual Mexican poetry movement of the 1920s, though Tinajera's character is fictional—and an inspiration to the visceral realists.

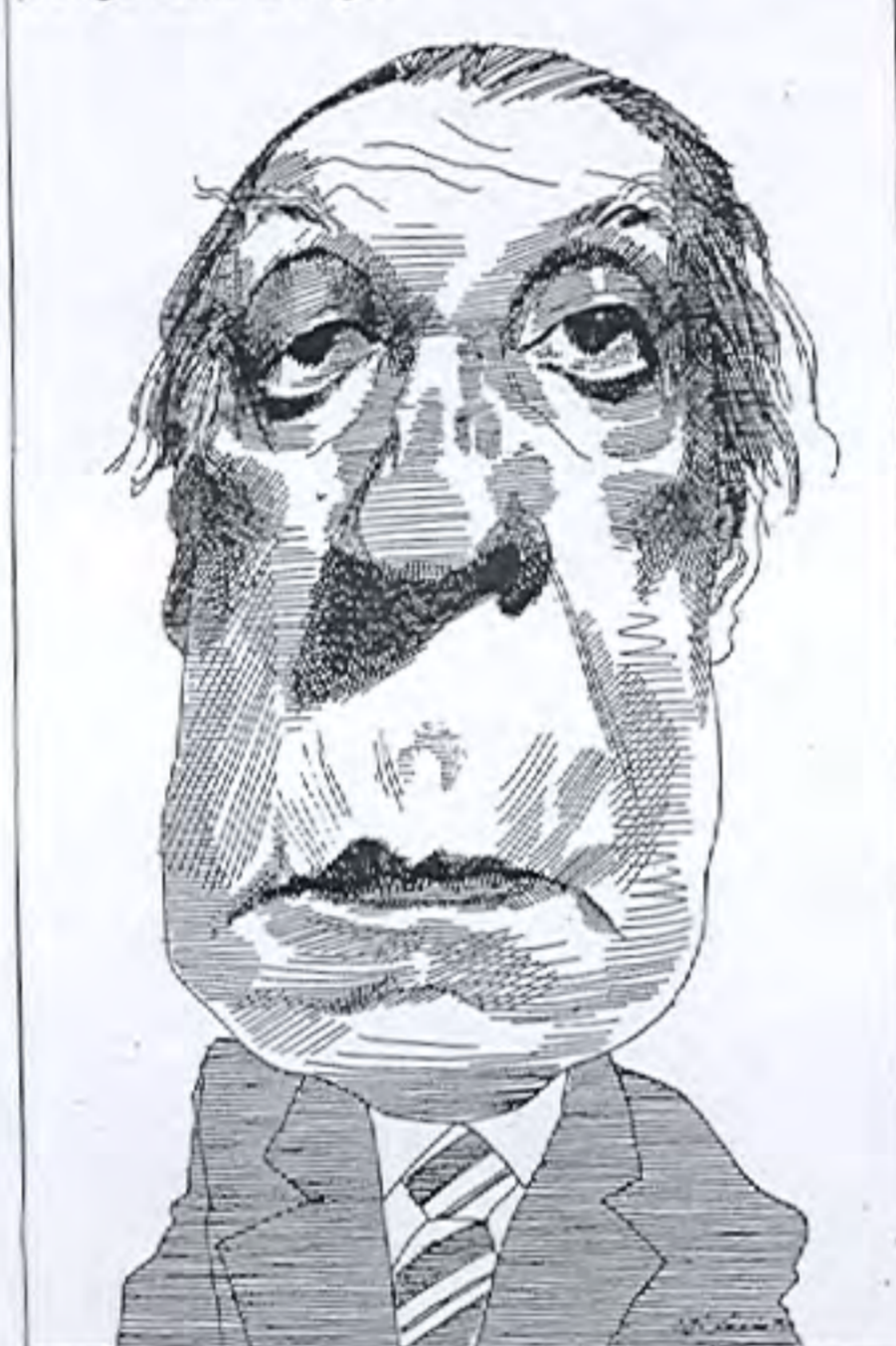
In the novel's four-hundred-page second section, titled “The Savage Detectives,” thirty-eight characters, from a total of fifteen cities and eight different countries, speak as if to an invisible detective who has been determinedly hunting Belano and Lima for twenty years. Characters recount the intersection of their own lives with the visceral realists' and digress into their own stories. The narrative doesn't proceed chronologically, but repeatedly returns to one long night—“when night sinks into night, though never all of a sudden, the white-footed Mexico City night”—during which Belano and Lima visit Amadeo, an old, impoverished stridentist poet who seems to be the last man alive with clear memories of Cesárea Tinajera in her Mexico City youth: he possesses a copy of the fifty-year-old poetry magazine in which she published her only known poem. Amadeo is amazed and delighted to have been found by the two boys, and to be able to spend a long night talking about poetry, reliving his youth, and drinking—they polish off a rare bottle, perhaps the last left in Mexico, of a mezcal with a talismanic name. “Ah, what a shame they don't make Los Suicidas mezcal anymore,” says Amadeo, “what a shame that times passes, don't you think? what a shame that we die, and get old, and everything good goes galloping away from us.”

In *The Savage Detectives* Bolaño shows how time punishes us for the rebellious dreams of youth, bringing disappointment, painfully modest accomplishments, broken loves, illness, even

violent death and, simply, the end of youth. But for readers no longer young, the novel also conjures youth in all its hilariousness and overwrought drama, and reminds us of the purity of young people's faith—above all in poetry. It can also make a reader care deeply about the characters, almost like a parent, wanting happiness for them, fretting when it eludes them, and finally forced to accept that they will live out their destinies on their own.

No character in a novel is really despicable or even dislikable when brought to life with skill, energy, and wit. Bolaño's hilariously drawn upper-class aesthetic snobs and pedants, for example, are very recognizable Mexico City types. Even the delightfully odd behavior of the character “Octavio Paz,” in the one episode dedi-

Jorge Luis Borges



cated to him, seems fondly written. In contrast to the awed García Madero, many of the characters in the novel's middle section who recall their encounters with Belano and Lima are quick to scorn them, calling them “cut-rate surrealists and fake Marxists,” and, not too unjustly given what occurs in several fraught sexual encounters, “limp dicks.” I can't think of another male writer in any language who creates very different female characters more convincingly or sensitively than Bolaño does, for all his earthiness. Belano and Lima pursue romantic relationships, for example, with several Mexico City Jewish women, who, while recognizably Jewish, are also as Mexican as any other of the characters, which should come as no surprise, but may to those English-language readers who like to insist on strictly racial definitions of Latin American identity.

The vibrancy of Bolaño's women suggests another aspect of his originality, at least in the context of Latin American fiction. When Julio Cortázar, in *Hopscotch*, portrayed young Latin Americans in Paris, one implication was that Paris was where they had to go to find personal freedom and an interesting and modern way of life. Bolaño has frequently acknowledged a debt to Cortázar's novel, but the Mexico City of *The Savage Detectives*, for all its local character and danger, has more in common, at least in the manner that the book's comparatively sophisticated and bohemian young characters inhabit it, with cities like New York or Paris than with any traditional Latin American setting. The

novel depicts Mexico City during the very years, ironically, that the rest of the world was discovering *One Hundred Years of Solitude* in translation, a book whose global success had the consequences, which its author could never have foreseen, of creating folksy stereotypes of Latin American life and the association of Latin American literature almost exclusively with magic realism that has endured for nearly forty years.<sup>8</sup>

One reason that Mexico City was paradise to Bolaño was that it was relatively removed from the political violence convulsing much of Latin America in those years. Mexico had its traumatic 1968, and its culture was certainly affected, but, as it always seems to following calamities, the country had quickly recovered its peculiar equilibrium. (“When the whole civilized world disappears Mexico will keep existing, when the planet vaporizes or disintegrates, Mexico will still be Mexico,” says a character in *Savage Detectives*.) This is wonderfully dramatized when a group of Mexican leftist writers travel to Sandinista Nicaragua on a junket. They might as well be revolutionary tourists from an American university—though much heavier drinkers than most gringo radicals. Ulises Lima, an accidental participant, slips away from the hotel that is the group's boozy bubble and spends two years, about which we learn nothing, wandering war-convulsed Central America, until one day, by then nearly forgotten by everybody, he reappears in Mexico City.

Ulises Lima's name evokes Bolaño's love of Joyce and also of José Lezama Lima, often regarded as the Spanish language's Joyce, and seems to confirm Bolaño's intentions to create, with *The Savage Detectives*, a contemporary epic. (When Spain's most influential critic, Ignacio Echevarría, observed that *The Savage Detectives* was “the kind of novel Borges could have consented to write,” he was surely referring, at least partly, to that novel's reinvention of classical epic.<sup>9</sup>) But Bolaño also said that he wrote his novel so that he and Mario Santiago could laugh over it together. In 1998, the year the book came out, Santiago was struck by a car in Mexico City and died before he could read it.

Bolaño has written an admiring essay on *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, one of his favorite books,

<sup>8</sup>In the essay “Los mitos de Ctulhu,” included in the posthumous collection *El gaucho insufrible* (Barcelona: Anagrama, 2003), Bolaño argued that no serious writers, not Borges, Bioy, Cortázar, Rulfo, Onetti, among others, or even “that duet of old machos, García Márquez and Vargas Llosa,” wrote “Latin American literature,” a stereotypical and fraudulent product now churned out by a long line of commercially promoted García Márquez imitators.

<sup>9</sup>In his 1967 Norton lectures at Harvard, Borges said, “I think the epic will come back to us. I believe that the poet shall once again be a maker. I mean, he will tell a story and he will also sing it. And we will not think of those two things as different, even as we do not think they are different in Homer or in Virgil.” See Aura Estrada's essay “Borges, Bolaño and the Return of the Epic” at [www.WordsWithoutBorders.org](http://www.WordsWithoutBorders.org).

and the streets of Mexico City are García Madero's Mississippi. Many characters take long walks through the city that give stretches of the book its tempo of endless afternoons and nights of youth when you can walk and walk and don't really have to be anywhere. In the end the “territory ahead” into which García Madero escapes is the Sonoran desert.

The novel's fifty-page final section, again narrated by García Madero, takes us back to the 1970s, where we last left him and his poet friends in the desert fleeing Lupe's pimp. In the book's final pages, García Madero and Lupe have just parted ways with Belano and Lima. They have found the object of their detective search, Cesárea Tinajera, only to inadvertently cause her death: she gets shot in a violent lonely-desert-road confrontation with the murderous pimp and his corrupt policeman sidekick, who have been relentlessly pursuing Lupe. So all Bolaño's themes have converged: the poets' search for the elusive idol, or for the myth of poetry itself; the interrelationship of poetry and crime; the violence that Latin Americans born in the Fifties can't get away from; the trinity of youth, love, and death. We already know, by then, what will happen to Belano and Lima.

But what about Lupe and García Madero? None of the characters in the book's long middle section mentions or seems to remember seventeen-year-old Juan García Madero. Early in the novel, in the rowdy lowlife cantina where the visceral realists hang out, Brígida, the waitress who has given García Madero his first sexual experience but who subsequently loses him to another waitress, the desperately loving Rosario, delivers a prophecy. She tells García Madero “that you're going to die young, Juan, and that you're going to do Rosario wrong.” By this point in the novel, the second prediction has already come true. But she has also told García Madero that he needs a good woman who will stand by him, and in Lupita he seems to have found one. The novel ends with the couple stranded in the desert, which is either an image of nowhere or of infinite paths stretching toward the horizon.

In one of his interviews, Bolaño made a distinction between celebrated authors whose works inspired imitators and a writer like Borges, whose fictions, he said, opened paths of literary experimentation for other writers to explore. *The Savage Detectives*, in a different sense, opens new paths too, some of them pointing north, toward the US border and the primary setting of Bolaño's next novel, *2666*. That setting is the fictional city of Santa Teresa, where many young women are murdered and where a mysterious novelist and German World War II veteran, Benno von Archimboldi, might be hiding. The multiple story lines of *2666* are borne along by narrators who seem also to represent various of its literary influences, from European avant-garde to critical theory to pulp fiction, and who converge on the city of Santa Teresa as if propelled toward some final unifying epiphany. It seems appropriate that *2666*'s abrupt end leaves us just short of whatever that epiphany might have been, resulting in another open-ended ending, in paths to retrace and resume, leaving everything behind again. □