

## INTRODUCTION

*Unpacking Bolaño's Library*

Over the course of the two prodigiously productive final decades of his life and career, and with a growing sense of urgency, Roberto Bolaño developed an acute, sustained awareness that writers in all genres compete in the literary marketplace for the reader's increasingly distracted attention. That competition, which Benjamin saw Baudelaire was among the first to understand, takes place not so much within an anodyne "World Republic"—that utopian ideal—but rather, among "combative literatures" continually under siege, the lived reality of which may be aptly described as what Franco Moretti has called the "slaughterhouse," what Bolaño himself once called the "vast minefield" ("vasto campo minado") of literature.<sup>1</sup>

"A library is a metaphor," Bolaño remarks in "Literature Is Not Made from Words Alone" ("La literatura no se hace sólo de palabras"), "for human beings or what's best about human beings, the same way a concentration camp can be a metaphor for what is worst about them. A library is total generosity" ("Una biblioteca es como una metáfora del ser humano o de lo mejor del ser humano tal como un campo de concentración puede ser una metáfora de lo peor. La biblioteca es la generosidad total").<sup>2</sup> Within the frame of that shared understanding, this book traces the evolution of Bolaño's work and his emergence as a synecdochic, exemplary, generational figure bringing together into varied, mobile, complex constellations four pervasive and enduring, inextricably interrelated, overriding concerns: poetry, fiction, literary history, and politics. My central argument is that at the heart of Bolaño's poet- and poetry-centered novels, with all their formal, conceptual scope and range, is the history and legacy of the prose poem, that oxymoronic, antigeneric, utopian, genreless genre, as I have described it elsewhere, which played such a consistently integral, informing role in Bolaño's achievement.<sup>3</sup> Manifestly indebted in its form and structure especially to the prose poems of Baudelaire's *Le Spleen de Paris* (1869) and Rimbaud's *Une*

*Saison en Enfer* (1873) and *Illuminations* (1873–1875), Bolaño’s first “novel,” *Amberes* (2002, written 1980; *Antwerp*, 2010), which has been called the “Big Bang” of his work, remained of such importance to Bolaño throughout his career that he referred to it in his last interview, with Mónica Maristain shortly before his death in July, 2003—a year before the posthumous publication of his magnum opus, *2666*—as “La única novela de la que no me avergüenzo . . . tal vez porque sigue siendo ininteligible” (“The only novel that doesn’t embarrass me . . . maybe because it continues to be unintelligible”).<sup>4</sup>

My starting point is a fundamental question for the kinds of investigations Bolaño’s work encourages among the growing legions of those he might call his fellow “literary detectives”: How did his work evolve from the disjunctive a- and even anti-narrative “novel,” *Antwerp*, a sequence of fifty-six numbered, individually titled prose poems only 119 pages long, in scale comparable to the fifty numbered, titled *Petits poèmes en prose* of *Le Spleen de Paris* (fifty-one counting the Preface to Arsène Houssaye)—each an average length of a half-page to several pages—to that most monumental of Bolaño’s works, *2666*, a single novel in five parts (or is it five novels in one book?) that, while weighing in at a formidable 1,125 pages in the original (a mere 893 pages in Natasha Wimmer’s English translation), concludes with the titled, two-page prose poem “Fürst Pückler” and its emphasis on the value of what it calls “small works” (“opúsculos”), “little books” (“libritos”), that can give “a rather decent idea” (“una idea bastante aproximada”) of an entire era?<sup>5</sup> Tracking the development of Bolaño’s diverse writing practices throughout his career, the chapters that follow explore the varied ways Bolaño’s coming-to-terms with the relation between the prose poem and the novel, in particular, opens onto the politics of genre, literary history, and politics. Saturating his work with authors, texts, dates and venues of publication, numbers of pages of books, literary commentaries, annotated bibliographies, critical histories and receptions real and invented, Bolaño figures his literary and literary-historical materials not as mere decoration, but as integral matter for reflecting on the genres, forms, discourses, disciplines, and media, trajectories, structures, textures, and architectures, of their own construction.

As is clear from the steady stream of edited volumes devoted to Bolaño’s work over the past decade, such concerns have proven pivotal for readers, poets, short-story writers, novelists, literary critics, and theorists throughout Europe, the Americas, and beyond. Understanding Bolaño as a writer in the most capacious sense of both Europe and the Americas in particular,

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my comparative approach emphasizes the extent to which his narratives circulate freely, as in *2666*, among the geopolitical and literary histories of all three continents. Complementing heuristically, prismatically, “Latin Americanist,” “hemispheric,” and “global” approaches, all of which, given the scope and range of Bolaño’s work, have both their value and their limitations, my argument seeks to position his work especially in relation to questions not so much of a narrowly “personal” experience or identity, as of poetry, the novel, literary history, and politics as transnational concerns aligned with Bolaño’s decidedly anti-parochial, cosmopolitan approach.<sup>6</sup>

Poetry, fiction, literary history, politics. These four pervasive, interlocking concerns are the cornerstones, I argue, on which the foundation of Bolaño’s work and ever-broadening appeal is built. As his now increasingly “global”—or in Gayatri Spivak’s specific use of the term, “planetary”<sup>7</sup>—reception attests, he has become in this sense a synecdochic figure, drawing both his admirers and detractors, as all synecdochic figures do, for writers of the final two decades of the twentieth century and the first few years of the twenty-first, not only in Chile, Mexico, and Spain, the three principal locations of his life and work, or in Latin America and the Spanish-speaking world more generally, but for what he himself called “all of Western literature” (“En fin, me interesa y creo que conozco un poco de toda la literatura occidental”).<sup>8</sup>

Despite Bolaño’s roots in Latin America, from his birth and residence in Chile to the age of fifteen through his nine years thereafter in Mexico, including his brief return to Chile in the year of the coup, his turn to the novel in the 1980s, following his move to Europe and eventually to Spain, demonstrates a perhaps initially surprising turn away from Latin American settings. While Latin America figures centrally during that period in Bolaño’s poetry, the sense Bolaño conveys of himself at the time as a novelist is at least as European as Latin American.<sup>9</sup> Focused more consistently and pervasively on poetry, and on modern and contemporary poetry in particular, than on the novel, Bolaño found in the history and legacy of the prose poem a fulcrum for the construction of what he calls in a synecdochic passage of *Los detectives salvajes* (*The Savage Detectives*) “poemas-novela,” what we may call his prose poem novels.<sup>10</sup> Situated within a lineage extending from Poe’s detective stories through the prose poems of Baudelaire and Rimbaud and the prose poems and short fiction of Borges, Bolaño develops a prose-poetic literary-historical investigation of relations between poetry and fiction, and between

poetry and the novel in particular, as well as between the literary and the non-literary, the aesthetic and the political.<sup>11</sup>

“The only exact knowledge there is,” Benjamin writes in “Unpacking My Library” (“Ich packe meine Bibliothek aus”), quoting Anatole France, “‘is the knowledge of the date of publication and the format of books.’ . . . Of all the ways of acquiring books, writing them oneself is regarded as the most praiseworthy method.”<sup>12</sup> Tracing the development and arc of Bolaño’s astonishingly prolific, varied work reveals four principal stages: 1) an extended early period from 1980 through 1989; 2) a transitional period between 1989 and 1993 culminating in the decision to assemble the collected verse and prose poems that would become *La Universidad Desconocida* (*The Unknown University*); 3) an intensely productive middle or late-middle period, from 1993 through 1998; and 4) a late, end-of-life period, from 1998 to 2003, with its explosive, final burst. Across all four periods, Bolaño explored literature’s multi-layered histories in poetry and fiction on every scale, from the minimal to the maximal. Echoing the displaced, exiled stance of the opening prose poem of *Le Spleen de Paris*, “L’Étranger” (“The Stranger”)—“ – Ta patrie? /—J’ignore sous quelle latitude elle est située” (“‘Your country?’ / ‘I am ignorant of where it is located’”)—to which, along with Rimbaud’s more disjunctive prose-poetic style, the structure and method of *Antwerp* are most deeply indebted, Bolaño speaks of himself in his 2002 preface as a writer without a country (“me sentía a una distancia equidistante de todos los países del mundo”).<sup>13</sup> A reader and writer, we could also say, without a definitive, pre-defined genre, Bolaño was determined from the beginning to explore what with Baudelaire he would call the “voyage” of reading and writing (from the verse and prose poems “Le Voyage” and “L’Invitation au voyage” respectively), wherever that voyage might lead.<sup>14</sup>

### Poetry

A certain view of poetry is at the heart of Bolaño’s work—in his prose fiction, and in his novels most strikingly, no less than in his verse.<sup>15</sup> But what is that view, exactly? How consistent is it? How static or dynamic? In what respects does it remain constant over time? In what ways does it change throughout Bolaño’s life as a writer of both poetry and fiction? At the core of Bolaño’s view of poetry, I will argue, is the history and legacy of the prose poem, the prose poems of *Le Spleen de Paris* in particular, as well as, to a lesser extent stylistically (especially after *Antwerp*, Bolaño’s most

Rimbaldian performance), those of Rimbaud (inspiration for his most prominent alter-ego, Arturo Belano), together the two synecdochic examples that shaped more than any other Bolaño's cultivation and development of the prose poem novel.<sup>16</sup>

Bolaño's early and enduring interpellation into what was called poetry in the specifically Chilean, later Mexican contexts of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, and as more an aspiring young apprentice poet than writer of fiction, is perhaps most vividly on display in his innovative essay, "Carnet de baile" ("Dance Card"), the penultimate essay of *Putas Asesinas* (2001) and concluding essay, in Chris Andrews' translation, of *Last Evenings on Earth* (2006).<sup>17</sup> Composed of sixty-nine continuously numbered sections ranging from one to a dozen lines of prose each, "Dance Card" encapsulates Bolaño's struggle to free himself from the hegemony of the poetry of Pablo Neruda, more specifically the Neruda of the *Veinte poemas de amor y una canción desesperada* (*Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Depair*). Contrasting Neruda, whom he describes as in the end a "dignified courtier poet," with Rubén Darío, Walt Whitman, José Martí, Violeta Parra, Beltrán Morales, Rodrigo Lira, Mario Santiago, Reinaldo Arenas, and "poets who died under torture, who died of AIDS, or overdosed, all those who believed in Latin American paradise and died in a Latin American hell," Bolaño poses a series of questions with Neruda at their center that suggest the difficulty not only poets but all writers face in responding to specific historical, literary-historical situations: "Why didn't Neruda like Kafka? Why didn't Neruda like Rilke? Why didn't Neruda like De Rokha? Go . . . Do we have to come back to Neruda as we do to the Cross, on bleeding knees, with punctured lungs and eyes full of tears?"<sup>18</sup> Finding himself "unquestionably, Parrian" in his self-described "isolation" among the "Mexican poets he was hanging out with and swapping books . . . the Nerudians and the Vallejians," Bolaño returns to Chile in 1973 "to help build socialism," meeting along the way "with revolutionaries of various stripes," purchasing on his arrival two of Nicanor Parra's books, *Obra Gruesa* (*Construction Work*) and *Artefactos* (*Artifacts*), attending a conference of "awful" Chilean poets and being briefly arrested and released, a month after Neruda's death, before leaving Chile in January 1974, never to return, for Mexico City.

Appearing three decades later, in 2003, the year of Bolaño's death, as the penultimate text of *El gaucho insufrible* (*The Insufferable Gaucho*, 2010), the prose-poetic essay "Literature + Illness = Illness" provides a kind of literary-historical will and testament, a final rendering of accounts of Bolaño's influences and investments in both poetry and fiction.<sup>19</sup> In the essay's

pivotal sixth section, “Illness and French Poetry,” Bolaño focuses especially on the enduring legacy of nineteenth-century French poetry, which he argues has remained not only still vital but indispensable. Describing the French as “well aware” that “the finest poetry of the nineteenth century was written in France,” Bolaño understands Baudelaire as the “point of departure” for that “great poetry” that “prefigured the major and still unresolved problems that Europe and Western culture were to face in the twentieth century”: “Let’s say that it begins with Baudelaire, reaches its highest volatility with Lautréamont and Rimbaud and comes to an end with Mallarmé . . . really, with Baudelaire, Lautréamont, Rimbaud, and Mallarmé, there’s plenty to be going on with.”<sup>20</sup> Opening onto the global, planetary frames of the opening lines of “Le Voyage”—“The child enthralled by lithographs and maps / can satisfy his hunger for the world”—and including the line that gives *2666* its opening epigraph, Bolaño concludes: “Between the vast deserts of boredom and the not-so-scarce oases of horror, there is, however, a third option, or perhaps a delusion, which Baudelaire indicates in the following lines: ‘Once we have burned our brains out, we can plunge / to Hell or Heaven—any abyss will do— / deep in the Unknown to find the *new*!’ (‘Au fond de l’Inconnu pour trouver du *nouveau*!’).”<sup>21</sup>

At the conclusion of its search for a cure to the illness that “afflicts not only our actions, but also language itself,” Bolaño arcs back toward prose fiction by way of the transformative poetic practices of Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Lautréamont, and Mallarmé (the Mallarmé not so much of “Brise Marine” but of *Igitur* and its “Crise de vers”) toward the prose-poetic, fictive, novelistic practices of Kafka in particular. In so concluding, Bolaño reaffirms a continuation of the voyage into the Unknown, and the search for an “antidote” to the splenetic “illness” of literature, through an oxymoronic, paradoxical reimagining of literature’s scope and scale. While his pivotal commentary on the enduring value of nineteenth-century French poetry focuses on two interconnected verse poems by Baudelaire and Mallarmé, what is perhaps most striking and important about the commentary is its prose-poetic form. Like Benjamin, for whom Baudelaire is no less central, Bolaño limits his explicit commentary on Baudelaire’s poetry, as does Benjamin’s “On Some Motifs of Baudelaire” apart from its two final pages on “Perte d’auréole (“Loss of a Halo”), to the verse poetry of *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857). Yet as with Benjamin, whose “One-Way Street,” “Central Park,” and “On the Concept of History” bear family resemblances as well to the prose poems of *Le Spleen de Paris*, Baudelaire’s most profound influence on Bolaño manifests itself not in explicit

commentary, but in the variety of prose-poetic, elliptically discursive forms that compose his innovative, heterogeneous writerly practice, a practice encompassing not only short fiction and poetry in verse and prose, but literary-critical, philosophical essays and “poem-novels” in prose. Benjamin’s astute observation on Baudelaire’s indirect absorption of Poe’s detective stories describes perfectly his own reception, and absorption into his own varied writing practice, of the prose poems of *Le Spleen de Paris*.<sup>22</sup>

### Fiction

“A library is total generosity” (“La biblioteca es la generosidad total”).<sup>23</sup> Among the acts of generosity most prized in Bolaño’s library were those of the author both Baudelaire and Julio Cortázar translated, whose encompassing strangeness and innovative legacy proved as pivotal to each, as also to Borges, as to Bolaño’s own. Affirming the transnational, broadly comparatist character of his interests in literature of Europe and the Americas, and the early and enduring influence of Poe in particular, Bolaño remarks in his 2002 interview with Carmen Boullosa, “Reading is Always More Important than Writing”: “I’m not one of those nationalist monsters who only reads what his native country produces. I’m interested in French literature . . . in American literature of the 1880s . . . As a teenager, I went through a phase when I only read Poe.”<sup>24</sup> “The honest truth,” Bolaño wrote in “Prólogo: Consejos sobre el arte de escribir cuentos” (“Prologue: Tips on the Art of Writing Short Stories”), his prose-poem-length preface (one-and-a-half pages) to the collected short stories of *Cuentos*, “is that with Edgar Allan Poe we would all have more than enough good material to read” (“La verdad de la verdad es que con Edgar Allan Poe todos tendríamos de sobra”).<sup>25</sup>

Acidly suggesting, by contrast, in the opening epigraph from Kafka for *The Insufferable Gaucho*—“So perhaps we shall not miss so very much after all”—that contemporary fiction may not live up to its hype, Bolaño turns in the collection’s final essay, “Los mitos de Cthulhu” (“The Myths of Cthulhu”), from his affirmation of the transformative legacies of the poetry of Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Lautréamont, and Mallarmé at the center of “Literature + Illness = Illness”—as antidote for what ails contemporary literature in both poetry and fiction—to a frontal attack on the state of contemporary fiction in Latin America and in Argentina in particular.<sup>26</sup> Mapping the figures and scenes, affinities and antipathies, alignments and choices of contemporary fiction in Argentina with the kind of



explicit, sustained attention and taxonomic impulses that Bolaño had previously reserved with few exceptions for modern and contemporary poetry, “The Myths of Cthulhu” takes on the claim of “a critic by the name of Conte” that “Pérez Reverte is Spain’s perfect novelist . . . the most perfect novelist in contemporary Spanish literature,” his “principal quality” being, according to either Conte or “the novelist Juan Marsé,” his “readability,” a quality that makes him, in Bolaño’s words, “not only the most perfect novelist but also the most read. That is: the one who sells the most books.” Contemporary literature, he writes, “especially in Latin America,” and he suspects “in Spain as well,” is defined only by “social success: massive print runs; translations into more than thirty languages . . . dinners with the rich and famous . . . and landing six-figure advances.”<sup>27</sup>

Taking his critique of Argentine literature to the heart of the canon in a second essay from the same collection, “Derivas de la pesada” (“Vagaries of the Literature of Doom”), Bolaño describes José Hernández’s classic 2,316-line epic verse poem *Martín Fierro* (1872, 1879), in a formulation rich with implication for his eventual abandonment of poetry as verse and embrace of the prose poem novel, as “As a poem . . . nothing out of this world” yet “As a novel . . . alive, full of meanings to explore.”<sup>28</sup> Challenging the work’s centrality in Argentine literature, he writes that “If *Martín Fierro* dominates Argentine literature and its place is in the center of the canon, the work of Borges, probably the greatest writer born in Latin America, is only a footnote.” Finding it “odd” that Borges himself “wrote so much and so well about *Martín Fierro*,” Bolaño notes that “With Borges alive, Argentine literature becomes what most readers think of as Argentine literature,” including such distinguished figures as Macedonio Fernández, Bioy Casares, “who writes Latin America’s first and best fantastic novel,” and “Cortázar, best of them all.” By contrast, “When Borges dies, everything suddenly comes to an end. It’s as if Merlin had died . . .” Characterizing literature as “an armor-plated machine” that “doesn’t care about writers,” Bolaño argues that “Literature’s enemy is something else, something much bigger and more powerful, that in the end will conquer it.”<sup>29</sup>

Recalling in “Encuentro con Enrique Lihn,” the final essay of *Putas Asesinas* (2001; “Meeting with Enrique Lihn,” *The Return*, 2010), his 1999 dream of being taken to Lihn’s apartment “in a country that could well have been Chile, in a city that could well have been Santiago, bearing in mind that Chile and Santiago once resembled Hell,” Bolaño represents Lihn, “a writer” he “had always admired,” as a counter-figure to Neruda,



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whose generous mentoring helped Bolaño begin to establish himself as a writer around 1981 or 1982, when he was twenty-eight years old, “living like a recluse in a house outside Gerona with practically no money and no prospects of ever getting any.” Experiencing literature at that time as “a vast minefield occupied by enemies, except for a few classic authors” (“un vasto campo minado en donde todos eran mis enemigos, salvo algunos clásicos (y no todos)”), Bolaño initiated a correspondence with Lihn in which he described Chilean literature as “with one or two exceptions . . . shit.” Projected by Lihn to become, in a letter he wrote to Bolaño in 1981–1982, one of the “six tigers of Chilean poetry in the year 2000,” Bolaño recounts the fates of the other five (Claudio Bertoni, Diego Maquieira, González Muñoz, Juan Luis Martínez, Rodrigo Lira) that led all but Bolaño himself to become “Not so much tigers as cats . . . kittens of a far-flung province.”<sup>30</sup>

For a writer whose work centrally involves the construction of a literary history by other means at the intersection of poetry and fiction, of the prose poem and the novel, especially one whose international reputation has been established much more on the basis not of his poetry (or at least not of his verse), but above all of his novels, it is striking how much less explicit attention he devotes, until late in his career, to writers and works of prose fiction. Described by Bolaño in “Sevilla Kills Me” (“Sevilla me mata”), the penultimate essay of *The Secret of Evil*, as the writer who “is or should be at the center of our canon” (“es o debería ser el centro de nuestro canon”), Borges is clearly a pervasive presence throughout Bolaño’s work, not surprisingly the only influence to whom Chris Andrews, in *Roberto Bolaño’s Fiction: An Expanding Universe*, and Héctor Hoyos, in *Beyond Bolaño: The Global Latin American Novel*, both devote full chapters. With Poe, Baudelaire, and Rimbaud, Borges is, so to speak, the center around whom Bolaño’s orchestrated attack on the state of contemporary Latin American fiction revolves.<sup>31</sup> Addressing the question “Where does the new Latin American novel come from?” with a list of young authors he first assesses as “a promising scene, especially if viewed from the bridge,” Bolaño concludes more pessimistically, but also realistically, by underscoring the extent to which all literature, not least the most contemporary, not least the most avant-garde, is in a continual process of becoming historical: “The river is wide and mighty and its surface is broken by the heads of at least twenty-five writers under forty, under thirty: How many will drown? I’d say all of them” (“¿Cuántos se ahogarán? Yo creo que todos”).<sup>32</sup>

### A Stroll through Literature

“The fact is,” Bolaño said in his 2003 interview with Daniel Swinburn, “when I imagine a story or a novel or a play, whatever it might be, perhaps somewhat less with a poem, the first obstacle to overcome, the first problem to resolve is that of the structure, that is to say, the frame.”<sup>33</sup> In approaching questions concerning poetry, fiction, literary history, and politics, questions of structure and form are for Bolaño a pivotal concern. As he writes in “Balas Pasadas” (“Spent Bullets”): “Every text, every argument requires its form. There are arguments or situations that ask for a translucent, clear, limpid, simple form, and others that can only be contained in forms and structures that are convoluted, fragmentary, resembling a fever or delirium or sickness. / Structure is never a superfluous resource.”<sup>34</sup> The transformative legacy of mid- to late-nineteenth century French poetry, and of the prose poem in particular, offers Bolaño a method, from *Antwerp* forward throughout his career, with which, if not to escape, then at least to get some distance from what Raymond Williams might call the familiar residual-dominant impasses of literature of the late twentieth century, in both poetry and fiction, if not globally, then at least throughout Europe and the Americas. It is in this enlarged, figurative literary-historical frame, reflecting the literal change of his writerly location from a Latin American to a European context, from Chile and Mexico to Spain, that we must understand the dreamscape exchange between Bolaño and Parra at the pivotal mid-point of Bolaño’s prose-poetic, literary-historical autobiography, “A Stroll through Literature”—“Where are you going, Bolaño?” he said. Far from the Southern Hemisphere, I answered” (“¿Adónde vas, Bolaño? decía. Lejos del Hemisferio Sur, le contestaba”).<sup>35</sup>

In counterpoint to the three-part organization of Bolaño’s monumental collection of his own poetry in verse and prose in *The Unknown University* (first assembled in 1993, published posthumously in full in 2004), which moves predominantly from verse (Part One) to prose (Part Two) and back to verse (Part Three), the structure of Bolaño’s much more condensed poetry triptych, *Tres* (first assembled in 1994) moves in the opposite direction, from prose to verse and back to prose. Described by Bolaño as, along with *Antwerp*, one of his “two best books,” *Tres* concludes—following the thirty-five page unnumbered prose poem sequence “Prosa del otoño en Gerona” (“Prose from Autumn in Gerona”) and the 18-page verse poem “Los neochilenos” (“The Neochileans”)—with “Un paseo por la literatura” (“A Stroll through Literature”), a modular, prose-poetic