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The Reading Space of Roberto Bolaño, or How to Use (Comparative) Literature

Abstract: In this essay, I propose a singular look at the works of the Chilean writer Roberto Bolaño (1953–2003). Specifically, I focus on his extraordinary, extremely functional, practical application of intertextuality. In his novels, we find interesting applications of literary texts both in the storyworlds (the use the characters make of books) and in the stories’ construction (texts as material or devices for the author). I describe the following functions of Bolaño’s use of intertextuality: basic (anecdotal), ontological, life-modelling, life-and-literature-mixing, identifying, prompting, connecting, and data-providing. I argue that, due to Bolaño’s foregrounding of the subject and activity of reading, as well as, perhaps more importantly, the author’s efforts to assume the position of a reader of his own texts, we can interpret his works as a specific reading space: a virtual, mental, imaginary area where the reader meets the text (including the author perceived as a fellow reader) and the two entities blend. For a reader involved in such a space, Bolaño’s work may be considered a manual for the use of literature and for blending one’s life with it.

Keywords: author, communication, intertextuality, reader, reading space, Roberto Bolaño

In this essay, I propose a singular look at a literature that is comparative in itself. While “text” might have lost its dominant powers due to the rise of “performance” as the metaphor or analogy for our everyday life (McKenzie 2001), it retains them in the works of Roberto Bolaño (1953–2003). This Chilean author’s *oeuvre* makes a compelling case for undertaking one more project aimed at exploring intertextuality and literature as a universal code. The writings of Bolaño seem to possess an extraordinary quality of being an extremely functional, practical application of intertextuality. Comparing and contrasting literary works in the novels of Bolaño is not limited to mere reflections on the subject. Texts are compared with one’s own experience and the personality of others, and basically serve as the glue that holds the scattered thoughts of the author, narrator, and characters together.

In Bolaño’s texts, the narrators always speak to someone, often to a silent narratee, reminiscent of the actual author, who seems to be posing as a simple scribe or a fellow listener. Even when these dialogues do not concern literature

explicitly (although they usually, at least partially, do), they still use the literary context as the main source of analogies. Bolaño seems to saturate his texts with literature. However, he manages to do that without pretentiousness and, at the same time, to fill his works with referential and critical reflections on reality. Nonetheless, even the most realistic explorations of the world's horrors are conducted with literature in mind and with literary texts in the hands of the protagonists. In this way, unusual and contrasting contexts are provided for each story, and a specific reading space is created. In the next section, I offer a description of such a space; in the subsequent parts of the essay, I explore the functions of intertextuality in Bolaño's works and the use of reading as a device, focusing particularly on the efforts of the author to assume the position of a reader of his own texts.

1 The reading space

I would like to propose a working definition of the reading space as a virtual, mental, imaginary place of encounter between the reader (who consists of body and mental network) and the text (and all its contexts, including the author), where these two entities, in a manner of speaking, blend into a complex integration network (Fauconnier and Turner 2004). As Wolfgang Iser suggests, in the process of reading we can “think the thoughts of another person” (1980, 125–126) and temporarily be “both ourselves and somebody else” (1989, 244), and we do not perceive the text from the outside, as an object of our study, but observe it actively from within (1980, 109). The German scholar's intuitions currently seem to be supported, to a certain extent, by cognitive research on reading (Gerrig 1998; Hamilton and Schneider 2002).

I propose to see the reading space as a paradoxical area, a sort of deconstruction-inspired double bind, where Iser's active reader,¹ placed by the German scholar inside the text, is also the participating reader from Stanley Fish's 1970 essay on “affective stylistics,” who, in turn, contains literature inside of himself (or herself). In this space, the process of reading entails the construction of the perceived “object” by the reader (what Iser dubbed the “aesthetic object”); it is an event, a participatory experience of the text both as a world that one can visit and as a game one can play.

¹ I am referring here not to Iser's concept of the implied reader but to his phenomenological hypothesis of an actual reader's process of reading.

Adding Jacques Derrida to the theoretical mix may seem excessive; however, I would just like to consider his performance as an idiosyncratic, “new”² reader (Fish 1980, 303), and see deconstruction as a very specific reading practice: an event that *transforms* the “space” of the text (Markowski 2003, 128–129), producing the reading space. The deconstruction-inspired reading space is thus based on the text, but it is not an image of it, nor is it its goal to produce what Iser described as the *Gestalt* of the text (a complete image of the whole). When reading, we seem to be at the same time inside and outside the text, oscillating between extreme immersion and cold critical distance, getting lost in the text and also bringing to it our own components (such as memories, experiences, emotions, knowledge, and idiosyncratic associations).

The reading space of Roberto Bolaño, that is, the one that might be built on the basis of his works as a result of reading, is conditioned by the author’s foregrounding of the subject and activity of reading. Most of his characters are readers and writers for whom reading is one of the most basic human activities. What is more, the author, following the tradition of Miguel de Cervantes (Álvarez 2006, 42), positions himself, by means of embedded stories and intertextual relations, as a reader of his own and other texts. Thus, the reading space of Bolaño, based on texts that themselves pose as (or really constitute) acts of reading, includes multiple examples and theories of reading.

The precise definition of reading is more problematic than it may seem, and cognitive psychologists, as Richard Gerrig observes (1998, 22), still wonder what mental activities enable us to interact with the text and, even more, immerse ourselves in it. In order not to oversaturate an already conceptually dense essay, I would like to see reading rather broadly as the creation and participation of the reader in the reading space, following the guidelines of the “definition” proposed by Derek Attridge, according to whom “reading [...] involves a number of different types of activity occurring simultaneously and not always in accord with one another” (2004, 79).

The following analysis of intertextuality and related phenomena in the works of Roberto Bolaño constitutes an approach to, and initial exploration of, the kind of reading space that his texts invite us to build. As a result of such an investigation, we can obtain an image of the many uses he gives to literature.

2 This adjective was literally accurate in the 1970s, when Meyer Abrams described Derrida, Harold Bloom, and Fish in this way in the critical essay “The Deconstructive Angel” (1977), to which Fish responded (also critically) in *Is There a Text in This Class?* Nonetheless, we can still consider those readers as “new” today, in the sense of the innovativeness and radicalness of their projects.

2 The functions of intertextuality in Bolaño

Bolaño uses reading both as a theme and as a device. On the one hand, he presents different strategies and practices employed by his characters. On the other, the narration is often constructed as the reading of a text (or texts). What is more, books are repeatedly wielded by the author as particular tools. Intertextuality in Bolaño can be analysed according to, for example, Gérard Genette's model; however, it is also possible to specify some particular functions that the Chilean author bestows on the works included in his texts. In this essay I will sketch some of them.

It is important to stress the exuberance of the intertextual connections in Bolaño's texts. For example, in *Estrella distante* (1996), a novel of only 161 small pages, 83 authors are referred to explicitly, not counting allusions and the like. Bolaño establishes critical, metatextual, historical, and parodic dialogues with many authors from different times and different parts of the world (from Homer to Isabel Allende).

2.1 The basic function: foregrounding of reading

In the works of Bolaño, literature is, first and foremost, something to be read. Intertextuality in a novel basically presents a reading list of the author; it reveals the quality of the text as something made out of reading. Bolaño's "basic" uses of literature represent the vastness of his intertextual repertoire, which serves both the plot and the composition of his texts.

The most straightforward image of intertextuality is a character in the act of reading. For Bolaño's protagonists, reading is one of the most important experiences, if not the most important one. Given that many of them want to be writers – more specifically, poets – they consider reading an obligatory education. Bolaño does not see writing as something separate from reading; on the contrary, the first is impossible without the second. In fact, sometimes the aspiring writers, as is the case with the visceral realist poets in *Los detectives salvajes* (1998), only complete the first step of writing, that is reading, and never actually write anything (at least not to the knowledge of the reader). For Bolaño, that does not exclude them from the writing community so long as they live the lives of true poets (Álvarez 2006, 38) and are readers of poetry.

2.2 The ontological function

Reading is also a very intense experience that can possess the power to blur the ontological boundaries between fact and fiction. For example, in the novel *Estrella distante*, the narrator, a writer, cooperates with a Chilean ex-detective to find an old acquaintance, Carlos Wieder, who used to be a poet but was also, however, a member of the army during Augusto Pinochet's regime and a serial killer of women. When the narrator is about to identify the criminal, in a seaside bar, he is reading the *Complete Works* of Bruno Schulz and feels, for a moment, filled with panic and anxiety, that the Polish writer is watching him: he sees the words on the pages turn into Schulz's eyes. In this case, Bolaño's use of the intertext has multiple meanings. One of them could be literary "vengeance" (an auxiliary, avenging function of intertextuality): the narrator is an accessory to the murder of Wieder (that is the detective's ultimate goal) – a neo-fascist criminal – and he reads a book by a Jewish writer killed during the war in a ghetto by a Gestapo officer.

2.3 The life-modelling function

Books are important correlates of the characters' real-life experiences, which are perceived by them (though it may seem counter-intuitive) as actualizations of their literary knowledge. For example, in *Los detectives salvajes* (Bolaño 2011, 427–449), one of the protagonists recalls a strange situation he witnessed during his holidays on the Costa Brava: a young boy got stuck in a chasm, a deep cave, and nobody knew how to help him. Automatically, the protagonist thought of Pío Baroja's short story "La sima" (1900), in which an almost identical occurrence takes place. In the story, the boy dies because everybody is convinced that a devil lives at the bottom of the cave and nobody dares to enter it. In *Los detectives salvajes*, the protagonist began to anticipate a corresponding outcome of the accident, but a guard from the campsite, Arturo Belano, the official literary alter ego of Bolaño, climbed down the cave and rescued the boy. From the protagonist's perspective, this coincidence was very significant and made him feel like his life was mysteriously interconnected with literature. From the writer's point of view, we have a reply to Baroja's text which could be described as a creative replotting. Belano does in the text what Bolaño does with the text: changes the outcome of events and further ridicules superstitions.

2.4 The life-and-literature-mixing function

Life and literature merge in many ways in Bolaño's world. Since most of the protagonists are, or want to be writers, it cannot be surprising that they try to blend their lives with art. Some of their efforts have humorous results (which does not mean that they should not be taken seriously). In one of the most interesting meta-literary fragments of *Los detectives salvajes*, one of the protagonists, Ernesto San Epifanio, a gay poet, explains his specific model of poetics. In his opinion, novels are generally a heterosexual genre and poetry is a homosexual one (the narrator of this part of the book, Juan García Madero, supposes that short stories must be bisexual, but he is not certain).

Dentro del inmenso océano de la poesía distinguía varias corrientes: maricones, maricas, mariquitas, locas, bujarrones, mariposas, ninfos y filenos. Las dos corrientes mayores, sin embargo, eran la de los maricones y la de los maricas. Walt Whitman, por ejemplo, era un poeta maricón. Pablo Neruda, un poeta marica. William Blake era maricón, sin asomo de duda, y Octavio Paz marica. Borges era fileno, es decir de improviso podía ser maricón y de improviso simplemente asexual. Rubén Darío era una loca, de hecho la reina y el paradigma de las locas. (Bolaño 2011, 83)

[Within the vast ocean of poetry he identified various currents: faggots, queers, sissies, freaks, butches, fairies, nymphs, and philenes. But the two major currents were faggots and queers. Walt Whitman, for example, was a faggot poet. Pablo Neruda, a queer. William Blake was definitely a faggot. Octavio Paz was a queer. Borges was a philene, or in other words he might be a faggot one minute and simply asexual the next. Rubén Darío was a freak, in fact, the queen freak, the prototypical freak.] (Bolaño, trans. Wimmer 2008, 80)

San Epifanio's theory and the classification of the poets merits a separate analysis that it is impossible to fit into this short essay. What needs to be stressed is that, in Bolaño's text, applying literary rules or categories to real-life situations is as normal and frequent as applying real-life, non-literary criteria or definitions to poetics.

2.5 The identifying (sub)function

One of the most interesting examples of such a process is the substitution of the description of a person with the description of their library. What you read is what you are, Bolaño seems to be telling us, when his narrator presents a character, another poet, first and foremost by describing his literary affiliations. In *Estrella distante*, the protagonists frequent two poetry workshops, one led by Diego Soto and the other by his best friend and rival, Juan Stein. "Sus poemas eran breves, influido a partes iguales por Nicanor Parra y Ernesto Cardenal, como la

mayoría de los poetas de su generación, y por la poesía lárca de Jorge Teillier, aunque Stein nos recomendaba leer a Lihn más que a Teillier” [Like most poets of his generation, he was influenced by Nicanor Parra and Ernesto Cardenal, but also by Jorge Teillier’s home-grown imagism, although Stein recommended we read Lihn rather than Teillier] (Bolaño 2010, 56; trans. Andrews 2004, 47). Stein’s tastes did not always agree with those of his students: he did not appreciate Jorge Cáceres or Rosamel del Valle or Anguita. He did like Pezoa Veliz, Magallanes Moure (which his students considered a “frivolity” on his part), Pablo de Rokha, and the love poetry of Pablo Neruda and the latter’s *Residencia en la tierra*, which was absolutely unacceptable for the young aspiring poets, born, in their own words, with an allergy to the Chilean master, a “neruditis” (Bolaño 2010, 57). These tastes are the basic description not just of the style, but also of the character of Juan Stein. Bolaño suggests that human personality, especially in the case of a poet, can – and perhaps even should – be described in the same way and with the same tools as the works he or she absorbs and produces.

2.6 The prompting function

The texts the protagonists read also serve as starting points for their literary investigations or as clues in them. *Pesquisa literaria*³ in Latin-American literature could be, and sometimes is, considered a separate subgenre of narrative, stemming from the writings of Jorge Luis Borges, such as “Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote” or “Examen de la obra de Herbert Quain.” One of Bolaño’s recurring motifs is protagonists who embark on journeys in search of lost writers. The narrator of *Estrella distante* is hired to provide literary expertise in the Wieder investigation (he studies multiple magazines in an attempt to attribute the authorship of various poems to the criminal in order to establish his location), but usually texts the protagonists read prompt them to act themselves. They undertake literary investigations in order to prolong the reading experience, never leaving their reading spaces. In *Los detectives salvajes*, Belano and Lima set out to find Cesárea Tinajero, who disappeared after moving north to Sonora. In 2666 (2004), four European literary critics travel as far as Mexico to find the author they are studying, Benno von Archimboldi.

³ Literary investigations in which the narrator searches for hidden meanings in books (usually apocryphal ones), for missing parts of books or their authors (who might also be missing), and relates his or her reading adventures.

2.7 The connecting function

The connecting function is a paradoxical tool for irrational sense making or establishing coherence. The books the characters read sometimes help them to connect multiple threads in the digressive plots of their own stories. The narrator of *Estrella distante* confesses that he always thinks of Juan Stein and Diego Soto in connection with another person, a transgender performance artist called Lorenzo-Petra. The narrator admits he cannot rationally explain the connection that he sees between them and that there is no specific reason for the fact that he always reflects on the three of them together, except perhaps a book they all read, which turns out to be a French version of Fritz Pearl's *In and Out the Garbage Pail* (Bolaño 2010, 85).

2.8 The data-providing function

Literature also helps to fill in the blanks of the stories that the protagonists (and the author) try to tell us. If we continue to take *Estrella distante* as a primary source of examples, the narrator quotes apocryphal (from our point of view) historical non-fiction by Julio Cesar Muñoz Cano, a former fellow-soldier of Wieder, when he tries to recreate the poet-murderer's life after the military coup. Books function in Bolaño's world as data collections of all kinds, broadening the characters' imaginative horizons and also simply serving as information. From the author's perspective, the function of literature in this instance is multifaceted: it constitutes a literary game (the data provided may be unreliable) and problematizes the distinction between fact and fiction.

It could be said that Bolaño and his protagonists see reality through the filter of literature. They do not perceive things and events as concrete and unambiguous, but rather as signs to interpret. In a way, they are like Don Quixote, of whom Carlos Fuentes has said he "does not see," he "*reads*" (1977, 196; emphasis in original). Unlike some critics, they do not see everything as text because of its structure; instead, they apply the mode of processing they know from reading, their basic experience, and education, to everything else.

3 The author as reader

Bolaño's books are full of other books and their readers, and the author himself also tries to assume the position of the reader. He foregrounds reading, presents

multiple readings or summaries of real and apocryphal works, and saturates his literary universe with intertextual connections. Above all, the writer converts himself into a reader of his own story by creating an autofictional alter ego who takes up the position of the main storyteller, seemingly overthrowing the author. Here we arrive at the point where the case of Roberto Bolaño becomes very curious. *Los detectives salvajes* can be unlocked with a biographical key – it is, among other things, a *roman-à-clef*. The young visceral realist poets of Mexico City correspond to Bolaño's real-life friends from his Mexican times. They also had a poetic movement, called infrarealism (see Madariaga 2010). Ever since the publication of this novel, many naive readers, but also many critics (Massot 2010; Rohter 2009), have tried to unlock all of Bolaño's other works with the same key. Arturo Belano began to be considered not just as Bolaño's official alter ego, but basically as his indistinguishable double.

Bolaño splits his identity: he is present in the text as Belano and on the cover of the work as the author. That is why it is possible to see his texts as structured as conversations, to see them as specifically dialogic. This is particularly evident in *Estrella distante*, where the narration actually is depicted as a conversation (though only one voice is audible): it is explained in the prologue that Bolaño, the writer, is recounting a story told to him by his friend, Arturo Belano. Embedding the narrative permits Bolaño to assume the position of the reader. What is more, *Estrella distante* is in fact a hypertext (in Genette's terminology) of one chapter of Bolaño's previous novel, *La literatura nazi en América* (1996) – a rewrite, or, in other words: a reading of the previous novel. In the prologue, Bolaño states that he and Belano are discussing the text that he (Bolaño) is writing (down) with the other text in hand.

In Bolaño's universe, even when the act of storytelling is backgrounded (which does not happen often), we sense the presence of an "organizer" of the text, of a silent partner in the characters' monologues, which are actually dialogues, as exemplified by *Los detectives salvajes*. The novel consists of three parts. The first and the last one are fragments of the diary of a young poet, Juan García Madero, who describes his initiation into adulthood, intimacy, and poetry, as well as the lives of his friends, the visceral realist poets in Mexico City in 1975, and the search for the lost poet Cesárea Tinajero. The second part is a collection of eighty-three testimonies of different people, collected from 1976 to 1996, which try to recreate the story of Arturo Belano and Ulises Lima, the founders of the visceral realist movement. Every person recounts their own story. Only in the penultimate testimony, narrated by a scholar, Ernesto García Grajales, does the reader get a more tangible glimpse of the anonymous "interviewer," the collector of these testimonies, the narratee of all the second-part narratives:

En mi humildad, señor, le diré que soy el único estudioso de los real visceralistas que existe en México y, si me apura, en el mundo. [...]. Moctezuma Rodríguez anda metido en política. Dicen que Felipe Müller sigue en Barcelona, está casado y tiene un hijo, parece que es feliz, de vez en cuando los cuates de por acá le publican algún poema. Ulises Lima sigue viviendo en el DF. Las pasadas vacaciones lo fui a ver. Un espectáculo. [...]. De Arturo Belano no sé nada. No, a Belano no lo conocí. [...]. Los real visceralistas del DF. Claro, porque ya había habido otro grupo de real visceralistas, allá por los años veinte, los real visceralistas del norte. ¿Eso no lo sabía? Pues sí. Aunque de esos sí que no hay mucha documentación. No, no fue una coincidencia. Más bien fue un homenaje. Una señal. Una respuesta. Quién sabe. (Bolaño 2011, 550–551)

[In all humbleness, sir, I can say that I'm the only expert on the visceral realists in Mexico, and if pressed, the world. (...). Moctezuma Rodríguez is involved in politics. I've heard that Felipe Müller is still in Barcelona, married and with a kid. He seems to be happy. Every so often his buddies over here publish some poem he's written. Ulises Lima still lives in Mexico City. I went to see him last break. A real spectacle. (...). About Arturo Belano I know nothing. No, I never met Belano. (...). The Mexico City visceral realists. Yes, because there had already been another group of visceral realists, in the 1920s. The northern visceral realists. You didn't know that? Well, they existed. Although talk about undocumented. No, it wasn't a coincidence. More like an homage. A gesture. A response. Who knows.] (Bolaño, trans Wimmer 2008, 584–585)

Given the general *modus operandi* of Bolaño, it is very tempting to identify this narratee with the author. Due to this, it seems (in the experience of the reader) that the writer assumes a similar position to that of the reader, as if they both read the diary of García Madero in the first and third parts of the novel and listened together to the testimonies in the second.

4 Conclusions

The categorization and description of the functions of intertextuality (and, by extension, literature in general) in the works of Bolaño proposed in this essay is provisional and, to a certain degree, arbitrary. It is an interesting problem and an inspiring project that I further develop elsewhere.⁴

All the examples so far have pointed to the literary aspect of Bolaño's literature. Nonetheless, there is another side to it. One of the most interesting characteristics of his texts is the fact that he seems to succeed in merging the tradition

⁴ The observations gathered in this essay form part of my PhD dissertation: *The Phenomenon of Reading in the Works of Roberto Bolaño. The Author's, Protagonists' and Readers' Response Strategies and Practices* (written in Polish, 2019). I describe the Chilean author's different uses of literature in Grzesiak (2015).

of self-reflexive, experimental literature with an acute critique of society and history. He manages to explore the horrors of World War II and Pinochet's dictatorship in Chile, of the female homicides in northern Mexico and the Tlatelolco Massacre of 1968 (see Moreno 2011), while simultaneously presenting the lives of young poets trying to live the lives of true poets, or critics looking for lost writers. Bolaño seems to invite his readers to explore not only the joys of literature, but also the horrors of the world, together.

By foregrounding the act of reading and narrating, the communicatory function of literature, and establishing potential real-world references, Bolaño creates a strong connection with the reader, a sense of complicity and participation in the storyworld. And since, in the reading process, the author and his work figuratively meet readers and their individual contexts, creating an ontologically problematic but cognitively immensely productive reading space, some elements of that space may find their way into the everyday lives of readers. Bolaño's work may be considered a manual for the use of literature and for blending one's life with it.

In the reading space of Bolaño, we can find interesting applications of literary texts both in the storyworlds (the use the characters make of books) and in the stories' construction (texts as material or devices for the author). We can learn to read for educational purposes, for pleasure, and also to use literature as the basic fabric of our world and a handy tool in our description and cognition of it.

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