

Surplus and Horror: Problems of Representation in the
Fiction of Jorge Luis Borges and Roberto Bolaño

by

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Introduction

When Roberto Bolaño published *Los detectives salvajes*—the book that would ensure his continuing renown in the Spanish-speaking world—in 1998, the literary critic Ignacio Echevarría described it as, “el tipo de novela que Borges hubiera aceptado escribir.”¹ Jorge Luis Borges, who never wrote a novel, much preferred the form of the short story. “Desvarío laborioso y empobrecedor,” he wrote “el de componer vastos libros; el de explayar en quinientas páginas una idea cuya perfecta exposición oral cabe en pocos minutos.”² Bolaño on the other hand, he was a proficient and respected writer of short fiction, but made his name with his novels, and the two that have won him the most recognition are in fact the two longest, most sprawling books in his body of work. While Echevarría’s comparison respected a certain fundamental difference in matters of form between Bolaño and Borges, and

¹ Ignacio Echevarría, “Sobre la juventud y otras estafas,” p. 73. “The type of novel that Borges would have consented to write.” All translations are mine except when otherwise noted.

² Jorge Luis Borges, *Ficciones*, p. 12. Hereafter cited parenthetically (*F*). “It is a laborious madness and an impoverishing one, the madness of composing vast books—setting out in five hundred pages an idea that can be perfectly related orally in five minutes.” Borges, *Complete Fictions*. Hereafter cited parenthetically (*CF*). All English translations of Borges’s fiction use this source unless otherwise noted.

was qualified by the acknowledgment that he was speaking “de un modo estridente,”³ it would nevertheless prove to be an enduring one. When Bolaño’s posthumous novel *2666* was published in English translation in 2008, the point at which Bolaño’s prestige among English speakers skyrocketed, reviewers in venues such as *The New York Review of Books*,⁴ *The Los Angeles Times*,⁵ and *The Observer*,⁶ among others, referred to Borges in their description of Bolaño’s novel.

In these reviews, however, there is rarely much examination of the connection between the Borges and Bolaño, and it seems that the similarity has become, at least for American reviewers, a matter of received wisdom. The review from *The Observer*, for instance, reiterates Echevarría’s remark without the ironic qualifier, likening Bolaño to a “grapho-maniac Borges” without pausing to explain the basis for the comparison, or indeed what it might mean. Bolaño likely bears a partial responsibility for this state of affairs himself, having spoken frequently of his admiration for Borges both in interviews and in essays, but rarely with the specificity that could form the basis for a more sophisticated comparison.

In the essay “El libro que sobrevive,” a fairly typical example, Bolaño speaks of Borges’s *Obra poética*, which, he says, is perhaps the book most important to him. Bolaño devotes a sizable percentage of the short essay to recalling his purchase of the book, the first one he bought upon moving to Europe. He describes with enthusiasm the sensation of reading the book, “hasta las ocho de la mañana, como si la lectura de

³ Ignacio Echevarría, “Sobre la juventud y otras estafas,” p. 73. “In a strident way.”

⁴ Sarah Kerr, “The Triumph of Roberto Bolaño.”

⁵ Ben Ehrenreich. “*2666* by Roberto Bolaño, translated from the Spanish by Natasha Wimmer.”

⁶ Bobrow, Emily. “The Fascination of What’s Difficult.”

esos versos fuera la única lectura posible para mí.”⁷ Later in the essay, Bolaño discusses the influence of Whitman on Borges. Arguing against the opinion of Harold Bloom, Bolaño positions Borges as the chief Latin-American inheritor of Whitman. But at the moment in which he describes just what he appreciates so much about Borges, he is uncharacteristically terse. While he convincingly recites a few characteristics of Borges’s poetry—its intelligence, its courage—he does not give any examples of these traits, nor does he refer to a single poem by name or quote a single line of poetry. Although Bolaño’s reticence is not out of place in this sort of capsule essay, it is also typical of his writing on Borges. All too often Bolaño takes Borges’s greatness as self-evident, leaving unexamined the specifics of Borges’s achievements and Bolaño’s relation to them as a writer.

The matter of influence, bolstered though it may be by various allusions to Borges within Bolaño’s fiction, produces more problems than genuine insight. It would be singularly inappropriate to write of a one-way influence, in which the writing of Bolaño has no bearing on how one reads Borges, the author who famously articulated the idea that “cada escritor *crea* a sus propios precursores. Su labor modifica nuestra concepción del pasado, como ha de modificar el futuro” (*OI* 109).⁸ Although I have given the elder writer the first chapter and the younger the second, in acknowledgement that Borges chronologically precedes Bolaño, I attempt to grant an equal interpretive weight to each writer. The basis for this essay, then, is not a matter

⁷ Roberto Bolaño, *Entre paréntesis*, p. 185. “Until eight in the morning, as if the reading of these poems was the only reading possible for me.”

⁸ Jorge Luis Borges, *Otras inquisiciones*, p. 109. “Each writer *creates* his precursors. His work modifies our conception of the past, as it will modify the future.” Borges, *Selected Non-Fiction*, p. 363. All English translations of Borges’s essays use this source unless otherwise noted. Hereafter cited (*SN-F*).

of influence so much as a set of shared preoccupations. The goal is not to read one writer on the terms of the other, but rather to discern patterns common to both.

The common conceptual preoccupation upon which this essay is grounded is the focus, present in both Borges's and Bolaño's fiction, on intellectual figures. Each writer's fiction is very much about fiction itself. The central characters are usually writers, artists, and scholars, and their problems are in many cases intellectual ones. Borges's fiction frequently adopts an essayistic form—in some cases the only differences between his stories and his essays is that the essays are about real, not fictional, books. Paul de Man writes of Borges's stories that, "their world is the representation, not of an actual experience, but of an intellectual proposition."⁹ Even when the stories are filled with action, their more traditional narrative tends to work in the service of dramatizing an intellectual problem. This is not so obviously the case in Bolaño's writing, which less frequently eschews plot altogether and often takes place in a more recognizably "real" world. One notable exception is Bolaño's novel *Literatura Nazi en América* (*Nazi Literature in the Americas*), which is a collection of biographical profiles documenting an elaborate (and imagined) universe of fascist literature across two continents. While *Literatura Nazi en América* is Bolaño's most blatantly and self-consciously Borgesian work, there are a good deal of subtler, richer parallels to be found throughout Bolaño's writing. Even when they seem closer to realism than anything Borges wrote, Bolaño's novels are set in a world of writers, of poetry workshops and literary critics, and the existence of an extra-literary world is often only relevant in its capacity to inspire and be represented by

⁹ Paul de Man, "A Modern Master," p. 23.

literature. Thus Bolaño's work, despite its apparently greater degree of realism, is just as much centered upon a specialized intellectual discourse as that of Borges.

Moreover, each writer tends to consider the various intellectual figures that populate their fiction specifically in their capacity as creators of representations. These intellectuals function as interpreters, they create their cultural production in reference to some exterior object. This pattern is most clear in the case of the various critics and scholars found throughout the writing of Borges and Bolaño—their work is in the interpretation of preexisting texts—but it is no less present in the artistic characters, the poets who aim to represent lost lovers or the painters depicting their surroundings. Even the stories and novels that feature less conventionally literary figures—detectives or gangsters, for instance—depict them precisely in their capacity as interpreters and creators of representations. These figures are in the end no different from the critics, and their work no less subordinate to the presumed original. Both Borges and Bolaño, however, are far too complex to let this relationship, in which the intellectuals faithfully reproduce an objective reality, stand untroubled. Each author finds ways to challenge their characters' attempts at representation, on at least two fronts. They show, on the one hand, the difficulty of achieving a truly faithful representation in light of reality's irreducible complexity; and, on the other hand, the undesirability and inutility of such a representation if it were in fact possible.

In the stories and novels that I will consider, there is always a text that appears to be a perfectly faithful representation, which through extraordinary, unusual means manages to preserve every detail, to be no less real than the object it purports to represent. Perhaps the greatest affinity—or at least the most crucial for the purposes

of this essay—between Borges and Bolaño lies in their shared skepticism of these sorts of hyper-representations. Each author, through different means, will undercut the validity of these seemingly perfect representations and will, through the very form of their fiction, posit alternative, subtler methods.

In my first chapter, I examine a number of Borges's short stories, considering certain thematic connections that resonate throughout his larger body of work. I begin by addressing two stories, "La Biblioteca de Babel" and "Funes el memorioso" that form Borges's objection to the possibility of a total, all-encompassing knowledge. Each story demonstrates the problems that accompany a surplus of information. In both cases, the availability of a wider set of data serves to limit rather than to expand the possibilities of conventional, useful thought. These stories challenge the notion that intellectual activity exists entirely within the realm of positive knowledge, locating it instead in the spaces where knowledge falls short. To accept this idea necessarily complicates the act of representation; if it is impossible to know, or even to perceive, an object perfectly, then a representation of that object will be necessarily imperfect.

The epistemological problems posed by these stories resonate throughout Borges's work. In the rest of the first chapter, I will analyze two more stories, "El Aleph" and "Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote," in light of these considerations. Both stories center around a literary text that is an apparently perfect facsimile of the object it purports to represent. In "Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote," the eponymous protagonist composes fragments of a novel that is exactly identical to the work of Cervantes. In the case of "El Aleph," the character Carlos Argentino Daneri composes a poem called "La Tierra" that is a faithful catalogue of the features of the

Earth, composed with the aid of a magical “Aleph” found in the author’s basement. Each of these texts can claim a greater than usual degree of fidelity achieved through unconventional means—magic in the case of Daneri, exact coincidence in the case of Menard.

In both stories, the narrator calls into question the value of these hyper-representative texts—explicitly in “El Aleph,” and implicitly, despite his direct claims to the contrary, in “Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote.” In the former, the narrator demonstrates, in tones of ridicule and derision, the tedium and futility of Daneri’s poem. In the latter, Menard’s eventual subordination to the narrator is more subtle, but nonetheless detectable by the fact that the narrator’s essay on Menard makes the protagonist’s *Quixote* entirely redundant. All the value that can be gained from Menard’s work, any point it has to make, is present in the essay that gives Borges’s story its form. By writing an essay on Menard, Borges’s unnamed narrator eliminates the need for Menard at all. Thus Borges’s quintessential technique of reviewing books that do not exist is the cornerstone of his evasion of the problems of representation. Borges can register his skepticism of a grand representation like Daneri’s without creating such a representation himself.

In the second chapter I attempt to reveal a parallel set of concerns, patterns, and techniques at work in the fiction of Bolaño. I consider two novels, *Estrella distante* and *2666*, and the way that in each novel the possibility of representation is complicated by a horrific reality. In *Estrella distante*, the repression of the Pinochet regime complicates the poetic efforts of an entire generation. *2666* takes on a wider range of subjects; one foremost focus is a series of brutal killings of women in the Mexican town of Santa Teresa, but the book’s digressive, fragmentary plot

encompasses a geographically and historically diverse continuity of atrocities. These horrors confound representation, but in different ways than the epistemological puzzles of Borges. Rather than their complexity, the quantitative sum of their distinct features, it is their very horrific character that makes them hard to contemplate, to comprehend, and to represent.

In each novel, however, there is a figure who somehow manages to incarnate his surroundings in his artistic production, to create a representation no less faithful and no less fantastic than the *Quijote* of Pierre Menard. These characters, rather than providing models to emulate, in fact demonstrate the limits and the ultimate undesirability of exact representation in the face of horror. In *Estrella distante*, Carlos Wieder, a member of the Chilean air force and of right-wing death squads manages through an avant-garde poetic project to reproduce the political climate of Chile after Pinochet's coup. The success of this reproduction, which, just like its subject, is violent and oppressive, delimits the two protagonists own poetry, and each one in their own way resists creating art that confronts their political reality. In *2666*, the figure of Edwin Johns, a painter who inserts his amputated, mummified hand into a self-portrait, demonstrates further the problems of a representation that coincides with its subject.

The narrative techniques of these novels function as a way of rejecting the ultra-faithful methods of a Carlos Wieder or an Edwin Johns while still respecting the singularity of the horrors they depict. In *Estrella distante*, the narrator's frequent recourse to conjecture and his constant challenges to the reliability of his own testimony serve to undercut the fascistic certainty of Carlos Wieder. In *2666*, the wild trajectory of the plot complements the unorthodox styles with which Bolaño narrates

the crimes in Santa Teresa to prevent the reader from constructing a coherent single image, on par with Johns's hand, of the horror that pervades the novel. Through different techniques, Bolaño accomplishes a parallel evasion to that of Borges.

The limits of this project, regrettably, have necessitated that I read selectively. The works I have analyzed represent in both cases only a fraction (albeit a larger one for Bolaño due to *2666*'s length and scope) of the entirety of their author's fiction. There are instances in the works of each that would further support the conclusions that I draw and there are instances that would challenge them. This project has not been an attempt to come to a definitive understanding of either author—if I have learned anything from these readings it is to hold such efforts under suspicion. Instead, I have tried to illuminate the pattern by which both authors' writing becomes a form of reflexive discourse.

Chapter One

In Borges's stories, conventionally opposed pairs such as dreams and waking life, or fiction and reality are separated by only the most porous of boundaries. His stories, by layering fiction on top of fiction, disorient their readers, who can rarely be quite sure of what is supposed to be happening, much less what it might mean. It is perhaps because of this confusion that Borges populates his stories with intellectual figures; for it is to them that these epistemological problems fall. These figures, however, rarely clarify much for the reader—Borges mainly uses them to add another layer to the rich texture of competing interpretations. In these stories, certainty is impossible, and representation becomes a more complicated proposition. Complexities of this kind are the essential facts with which the representations—both those that fictional figures within Borges's stories create and those that Borges himself creates through his stories—of Borges's fiction must contend.

“La Biblioteca de Babel” and “Funes el memorioso”

At the heart of these difficulties is Borges's critique of the possibility of total or complete knowledge. On its most superficial level, this critique manifests itself as

the skepticism that any one interpreter of a situation or a text has access to all the relevant information that would inform a perfectly correct representation. On a more fundamental level, though, Borges's fiction challenges the notion that any sort of all-encompassing knowledge is desirable or valuable at all. If such knowledge is either unobtainable or useless, it follows that certainty cannot be possible and representation cannot be entirely faithful. This critique of total knowledge is present in any number of Borges's stories, but two of them elucidate it better and with more intensity than perhaps any others. Each story is essayistic in form, describing and analyzing a phenomenon rather than constructing a traditional narrative. Both of these stories center on an extraordinary source of knowledge. The first, "La Biblioteca de Babel," describes a universe that is also a library, containing every possible book. The second, "Funes el memorioso," takes the form of a brief biographical essay about a man with perfect memory and perception. These stories, contrary to what one might initially expect, dramatize the problems of surplus—the dimensions of the Library of Babel render it functionally useless, and Funes's prodigious mind leads only to paralysis. Read in concert, "La Biblioteca de Babel" and "Funes el memorioso" form a two-pronged attack on the idea of total knowledge, demonstrating the problems inherent in a knowledge of infinite breadth in the case of the former, and infinite depth in the case of the latter.

The narrator of "La Biblioteca de Babel" relates a history of his peculiar world that parallels his readers' eventual realization that the Library is in fact a much less marvelous place than they might have originally supposed. The Library, coincident with the known universe, is a labyrinthine structure of indefinite size, subdivided into numerous hexagonal rooms filled with books. Eventually, the librarians deduce the

character of their surroundings. They realize that they are in a complete library, containing every book within a certain limit of pages and characters. The Library holds not only each book that has been written, but also each book that could be written, every possible combination of orthographic symbols. The situation seems at first to be miraculous. “Cuando se proclamó que la Biblioteca abarcaba todos los libros,” writes the narrator, “la primera impresión fue de extravagante felicidad” (*F* 92).¹⁰ At first the denizens of the Library believe themselves to be incredibly privileged: they are in the midst of a great inheritance, and they rejoice that there is no problem, “cuya elocuente solución no existiera: en algún hexágono [de la Biblioteca]” (*F* 92).¹¹ Among the miraculous volumes that must exist somewhere within the confines of the Library, the narrator lists “la historia minuciosa del porvenir, las autobiografías de los arcángeles... el evangelio gnóstico de Basíledes... la relación verídica de tu muerte” (*F* 92).¹² To live in the Library is to be in the presence of the sum of all knowledge.

What the librarians fail to consider in their initial elation is the vast quantity of completely useless books that surrounds every intelligible one. As the realization dawns upon the librarians, “de que algún anaquel en algún hexágono encerraba libros preciosos y de que esos libros preciosos eran inaccesibles,” their elation turns to be

¹⁰ “When it was announced that the Library contained all books, the first reaction was unbounded joy” (*CF* 115).

¹¹ “Whose eloquent solution did not exist—somewhere in some hexagon [of the Library]” (*CF* 115).

¹² “The detailed history of the future, the autobiographies of the archangels... the gnostic gospel of Basilides... the true story of your death” (*CF* 115).

despair (*F* 94).¹³ In a complete library, most books must be indecipherable. The narrator speaks of one book that consists entirely of “las letras M C V, perversamente repetidas desde el renglón primero hasta el último” and another that is “un mero laberinto de letras, pero la página penúltima dice *Oh tiempo tus pirámides*” (*F* 89).¹⁴ Statistics ensure that books much like the above examples form the large majority of the Library’s contents. The Library’s disorder, meanwhile, dictates that the books the librarians seem to prize, including various historical documents, works of great literature, and their own personal “vindications,” are all but impossible to find. The Library grants its residents access to the sum of all knowledge only in theory; in practice, it virtually precludes access to any particular book they might want to read.

While the Library’s size and lack of organization negate the likelihood of physically encountering a copy of any particular book, the nature of the library itself poses even deeper problems for the reliability of written texts in general. These problems are illuminated by the profusion of spurious versions that accompanies any given book that exists in the library. To the narrator, this idea is a relief, a consolation for the possibility that “inquisitors” seeking to purify the library have destroyed invaluable books. Although each book in the library is unique, for each one there exist “varios centenares de miles de facsímiles imperfectos: de obras que no difieren sino por una letra o por una coma” (*F* 95).¹⁵ Although these close facsimiles could be quite useful, their existence implies an equal or greater number of facsimiles that

¹³ “That some bookshelf in some hexagon contained precious books, yet that those precious books were forever out of reach” (*CF* 116).

¹⁴ “The letters M C V perversely repeated from the first line to the last... a mere labyrinth of letters whose penultimate page contains the phrase *O Time thy pyramids*” (*CF* 113-114).

closely resemble their original—although this word is likely something of a misnomer here—but differ in crucial points. The narrator alludes to this dilemma when he notes that among the books the Library contains are “el catálogo fiel de la Biblioteca, miles y miles de catálogos falsos, la demostración de la falacia de esos catálogos, la demostración de la falacia del catálogo verdadero” (*F* 92).¹⁶ In the disorder of the Library, there would be no way to distinguish between these binary pairs. The true catalogue and any number of false catalogues would appear equally plausible. This observation can easily be extended to any written document available in the Library. Pierre Macherey notes that any book that can be found there, “only exists in its recognizable form because it is implicitly related to the totality of all possible books. It exists, it has its allotted place in the universe of books, because it is an element in a totality.”¹⁷ Each book in the Library, then, is inevitable, existing not because of any value in its content but merely because it is a possible combination of letters and punctuation. It follows that for every text to be found, there exist multiple variants that appears equally believable regardless of any truth-content they might possess. The verisimilitude of such texts, which must exist in a complete library, engenders a suspicion that can never be dispelled.

“La Biblioteca de Babel,” takes the simple idea of the library, an idea that happens to be a symbol of knowledge, and expands its boundaries to their furthest logical extensions. Rather than fostering total knowledge, the Library demonstrates

¹⁵ “Several hundred thousand imperfect facsimiles—books that differ by no more than a single letter, or a comma” (*CF* 116).

¹⁶ “The faithful catalog of the Library, thousands and thousands of false catalogs, the proof of the falsity of those false catalogs, a proof of the falsity of the *true* catalog” (*CF* 115).

¹⁷ Pierre Macherey, “Borges and the Fictive Narrative,” p. 77.

its impossibility. Expanding the limits of the library does not lead to a functional expansion; in fact, the Library of Babel is entirely useless as a library. As the volume of available books expands, the reliability of each book is greatly diminished. Burton Hatlen writes that, “a book, by its very nature seeks to *be* the world, and in this story Borges reveals to us how oppressive a world made solely of words would be.”¹⁸ In the Library world that Borges depicts, knowledge is impossible for the librarians despite the presence, surrounding them, of its constituent parts. By multiplying, combining, and extending the elements of written language to the limit, the system loses its utility. This situation, in turn, complicates the act of representation. Just as no librarian can make sense of the books in the Library, no interpreter can be aware of all the relevant details. Representation is necessarily imperfect—a total apprehension of the object to be represented is impossible.

In this context, “Funes el memorioso,” reads like a corollary to “La Biblioteca de Babel.” In moving from one to the other, the reader follows Borges from the expansive to the minute. In “La Biblioteca de Babel,” the realm of knowledge is vast—too vast, in fact, to be accessible. In “Funes el memorioso,” however, the arena shifts to the mind of one man. If the former story dealt with the problems that sprawl posed to knowledge, the latter deals instead with the problems of concentration. Despite its greatly reduced scale, this story is just as much concerned with the problems posed by surplus amounts of knowledge as the “La Biblioteca de Babel.” Ireneo Funes, the subject of the story, is a 19th Century gaucho with both perfect memory and perfect perception. In the story, a young man named Borges, a native of the city who first meets the protagonist during vacations at a family ranch,

¹⁸ Hatlen, Burton Hatlen, “Borges and Metafiction,” p. 140.

details his few brief encounters with Funes and expounds upon his extraordinary mental abilities. Funes's awareness of everything he experiences extends to the finest details and he retains it all. Like the Library, Funes's brain is a privileged site of knowledge, albeit a more focused, contained one. He avoids many of the most obvious difficulties of the Library. Funes does not need to search through countless rooms to reach the right data—he can summon it at will.

When Funes is described as “un precursor de los superhombres, ‘un Zarathustra cimarrón y vernáculo,’” the reference, at least initially, does not seem to be ironic (*F* 124).¹⁹ In addition to his feats of memorization—he is able to become fluent in Latin merely by studying a Latin-Spanish dictionary—Funes above all others exemplifies certain types of perception privileged by Nietzsche. In “On Truth and Lying in an Extra-Moral Sense,” Nietzsche critiques the conceptual categories that man has created with language, writing that,

“just as no leaf is ever exactly the same as any other, certainly the concept ‘leaf’ is formed by arbitrarily dropping those individual differences, by forgetting the distinguishing factors, and this gives rise to the idea that besides leaves there is in nature such a thing as the ‘leaf.’”²⁰

The act of naming is, for Nietzsche, the beginning of dishonesty. When one begins to think in concepts created by man, one loses sight of the actual things that are represented by their names. Funes, with his perfect perception, is able to see the individual leaf unobstructed by the weight of the generic category “leaf.” Categorical thinking does not impair Funes's vision; his memory is prodigious enough that it is

¹⁹ “A precursor of the race of supermen—‘a maverick and vernacular Zarathustra’” (*CF* 131).

not necessary. It is not only that Funes refuses to group individual specimens into larger categories—he resists even assigning a common identity to anything that changes from one moment to the next. Borges writes of Funes that, “le molestaba que el perro de las tres y catorce (visto de perfil) tuviera el mismo nombre que el perro de las tres y cuarto (visto de frente)” (*F* 134).²¹ He is able to experience the truth as envisioned by Nietzsche in a way that nobody else could.

Funes, though, is not able to capitalize on his astonishing abilities in the way that one might suspect. When the narrator meets him, he is more or less completely incapacitated, unable to leave his room. Funes’s paralysis is initially linked quite literally with his talents—both are apparently the result of the same horse-riding accident. “Al caer, perdió el conocimiento,” Borges writes, “cuando lo recobró, el presente era casi intolerable de tan rico y tan nítido, y también las memorias más antiguas y triviales” (*F* 130).²² Beyond this superficial connection between the two central facts of Funes’s life, there are deeper relations. It is not only Funes’s physical paralysis that confines him to his bedroom. One detail, revealed early in the narrative is telling: Funes, “en los atardeceres, permitía que lo sacaran a la ventana” (*F* 126).²³ During the daytime, to leave his darkened room would be to risk drastic overstimulation. His gift of vision is in fact more of a curse. Borges reveals that

²⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lying in an Extra-Moral Sense,” p. 249.

²¹ “It irritated him that the ‘dog’ of three-fourteen in the afternoon, seen in profile, should be indicated by the same noun as the dog of three-fifteen, seen frontally” (*CF* 136).

²² “When he fell, he’d been knocked unconscious; when he came to again, the present was so rich, so clear, that it was almost unbearable, as were his oldest and even his most trivial memories” (*CF* 135).

²³ “At dusk, he would let himself be carried to the window” (*CF* 132).

“Funes discernía continuamente los tranquilos avances de la corrupción, de las caries, de la fatiga. Notaba los progresos de la muerte, de la humedad” (*F* 134).²⁴

The reader begins to suspect that even if he were not paralyzed, it would be hard for Funes to leave his bedroom.

Despite—or because of—his ability to see the exterior world with unique fidelity, Funes cannot escape his own mind. The reader discovers here that Funes’s paralysis and his talents are not in fact two separate, opposed outcomes of his accident; rather, they are two functions of the same phenomenon, acting in concert. Funes’s paralysis is his memory. Borges remarks that he believes that Funes “no era muy capaz de pensar. Pensar es olvidar diferencias, es generalizar, abstraer. En el abarrotado mundo de Funes no había sino detalles, casi inmediatos” (*F* 135).²⁵ Here is perhaps Borges’s most lucid exposition of this recurring problem. Thought is impossible for Funes just as learning is impossible in the Library. No detail can be understood to have any significance if every detail is available and undifferentiated. To think, following Borges, is to try to fill in the spaces that knowledge leaves empty.

Funes is unable to use his incredible memory for substantive intellectual ends. The two projects on which he spends his days are devising a new system of numbers—which could not really be called a system as it dispenses with any sort of method or arrangement—and creating an exhaustive, ordered catalogue of his own memories. These twin efforts are, in a sense, the emblems of Funes’s ability and inclination to create perfect representations. His catalogue of numbers, which Borges

²⁴ “Funes could continually perceive the quiet advances of corruption, of tooth decay, of weariness. He saw—he *noticed*—the progress of death, of humidity” (*CF* 136).

cannot comprehend, allows him to represent each number as a singularity, a quantity he can understand without the simplification of the decimal system. The latter project is more ambitious. Were Funes actually able to reduce “cada una de sus jornadas pretéritas, a unos setenta mil recuerdos, que definiría luego por cifras” (*F* 133),²⁶ the result would be a complete, perfect representative system of everything he had experienced in his life. Borges, after acknowledging their “cierta balbuciente grandeza,” (*F* 134)²⁷ ultimately pronounces these projects senseless. While they occupy Funes’s time, they have no bearing on anything but his own internal life. Each so-called system, if achieved, would be total within its own internal logic, but would also be completely incommunicable, and thus lose any power it could hold as a representation.

These stories elucidate the problems of a reality that is both highly complex and irreducible.²⁸ Neither Funes nor the librarians, contrary to what any reader might reasonably expect at first, is any wiser for the incredible quantity of information that surrounds them. The universe is too vast to be taken in and its discrete units are too complex to yield any authoritative understanding. By negating the potential for the complete apprehension of any given phenomenon, these conditions necessarily limit the possibility for a faithful representation. Total perception replicates the phenomenon itself and makes interpretation irrelevant and tautological, hence Funes’s

²⁵ “Was not very good at thinking. To think is to ignore (or forget) differences, to generalize, to abstract. In the teeming world of Ireneo Funes there was nothing but particulars—and they were virtually *immediate* particulars” (*CF* 137).

²⁶ “Every one of his past days to some seventy thousand recollections, which he would then define by numbers” (*CF* 136).

²⁷ “Certain halting grandeur” (*CF* 136).

inability to think. A truly “faithful” representation of a complex phenomenon cannot exist; either it would reduce the degree of complexity, and thus lose fidelity to its object, or it would reproduce exactly that complexity, in which case it would not be a useful representation at all, merely a sterile replica.

Borges, as the narrator of “Funes el memorioso,” subtly articulates the foundation of a literary style opposed to the excesses of his subject. In choosing the form of a biographical sketch as his means to discuss Funes, Borges deliberately selects a form that limits the workings of the memory. The biographical sketch, as Borges practices it here, consists of the narrator’s stylized recollection of a few brief encounters with his subject. It is concise, selective, and subjective, all of the things that Funes’s memory is not. In presenting his story in this way, Borges strengthens his criticism of Funes’s totality of knowledge. Although the contrast between the form of the story and the form of Funes’s memory is never presented explicitly, nor is it developed in a great level of detail, it demonstrates in a more subdued form a technique that Borges will rely upon, and push further in a number of other stories.

“El Aleph”

In the story “El Aleph,” the limits of knowledge revealed in “La Biblioteca de Babel” and “Funes el memorioso” form the basis of the conflict between a poet who, through fantastical means, writes a poem that is a faithful and legible representation of the exterior world, and the fractured narrative that contains him. The tension between this poet, Carlos Argentino Daneri, and the narrator, again a character named

²⁸ For Borges’s most concise exposition of this problem, see “Del rigor en la ciencia,” which tells of a map so accurate that it covers the very territory it purports to

Borges, who in this case bears an unmistakable resemblance to his creator, illuminates two methods of approaching the problem of representation. The two characters seem to have much in common—both are poets, and they belong to the same Buenos Aires literary milieu. Jaime Alazraki recognizes the two characters as doubles, writing that “[Daneri] es también una caricatura del escritor que Borges fue en sus cominezos barrocos... Borges se enfrenta con su fantasma barroco pero visto desde una distancia que funciona como un espejo deformante.”²⁹ Despite these superficial similarities, however, Borges and Daneri’s interactions together are characterized by a barely concealed mutual dislike. This undercurrent of personal animosity is not entirely separate from an intellectual divide between the two that centers ultimately on an implicit disagreement over the potential merits of total representation. While Daneri offers a prime example of artistic failure caused by an excessive and misplaced fidelity to a reality that cannot be replicated in a meaningful way, Borges demonstrates the possibilities for a more creative mode of representation that is self-consciously if not deliberately removed from its ostensible subject.

It is Beatriz Viterbo—Borges’s unrequited love and Daneri’s first cousin—who, in her absence, initially brings the two poets together. After Beatriz’s death, Borges chooses to visit her house on her birthday each year, “para saludar a su padre y

represent. Jorge Luis Borges, *El hacedor*, p. 103.

²⁹ Alazraki, Jaime. *La prosa narrativa de Borges*. Madrid: Editorial Gredos, S. A., 1983. p. 442. “Daneri is also a caricature of the writer that Borges was in his baroque beginnings... Borges confronts his baroque phantasm but seen from a distance that functions as a distorting mirror.” In support of Alazraki’s contention is the fact that Daneri wins second prize in the Argentine Premio Nacional de Literatura of 1941 (A 195). Borges—the author, not the character—received the second prize in 1941 for *El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan*, his first mature collection of fiction. Evelyn Fishburn and Psiche Hughes, *A Dictionary of Borges*, p. 5.

a Carlos Argentino Daneri” (A 176).³⁰ In addition to any altruistic motives Borges may have for these visits, they provide him an opportunity to indulge his obsession for the now-dead Beatriz. In the beginning of the story, Borges describes seeing a new billboard on the day of her death and remarks on his exasperation that, “el incesante y vasto universo ya se apartaba de ella y que ese cambio era el primero de una serie infinita” (A 175).³¹ In visiting her house, Borges enters a part of the world that has not forgotten Beatriz Viterbo, as evidenced by the photographs on display, upon which Borges fixates. In visiting the house, Borges rejoices that, “de nuevo aguardaría en el crepúsculo de la abarrotada salita, de nuevo estudiaría las circunstancias de sus muchos retratos” (A 176).³² Whatever the true nature of these visits, Borges slowly ingratiates himself with his hosts. After more than ten years of annual visits, Daneri reads Borges the beginnings of an epic poem he is composing, and, shortly after, reveals to him that he has in his basement an “Aleph,” or, “uno de los puntos del espacio que contienen todos los puntos” (A 187).³³ The Aleph, that is to say, is a point in space which encapsulates “el espacio cósmico... sin disminución de tamaño” (A 192).³⁴ Daneri’s house is the site of a microcosm of the universe; it is also, more obliquely, the site of the absence of Beatriz Viterbo. While, the latter of these facts is more pertinent to Borges, it is the former that informs Daneri’s poetic project.

³⁰ Jorge Luis Borges, *El Aleph*, p. 176. “To pay my respects to her father and... Carlos Argentino Daneri” (CF 274).

³¹ “The vast unceasing universe was already growing away from her, and that this change was but the first in an infinite series” (CF 274).

³² “Once again I would wait in the half-light of the little parlor crowded with furniture and draperies and bric-a-brac, once again I would study the details of the many photographs and portraits of her” (CF 274).

³³ “One of those points in space that contain all points” (CF 280).

Daneri, like Funes or the librarians of Babel, possesses a very privileged source of information, having unmediated access to the Aleph. Daneri, however, functions as a sort of intermediate figure. The Aleph is neither the entirety of his surroundings (as is the Library for its residents) nor the interior structure of his mind (as Funes's memory is for him). Because of this slight distance between Daneri and the source of his fantastical inspiration, he can approach the acuity of perception achieved by Funes without lapsing into complete intelligibility. The infinite and minuscule replica of the universe that is his Aleph is a great boon to a poet, and Daneri uses it to construct a poem, "La Tierra," which he fancies his magnum opus. The poem is Daneri's attempt to "versificar toda la redondez de la planeta" (A 181).³⁵ He aims to accurately transcribe the details of the world as he perceives it in the Aleph and to animate these details with a highly ornamented, Baroque style marked by "la pintoresca digresión y el gallardo apóstrofe" (A 179).³⁶ In doing so, Daneri assumes that he can actually transmit what he sees in the Aleph and that the resulting text would have some sort of value, whether artistic or informative.

The narrator—who, despite a personal and professional rivalry with Daneri, seems to have the weight of evidence on his side—calls these assumptions into question. "La Tierra" functions as an incomplete but faithful rendering of the data and visual stimulus gleaned from the Aleph. It describes, in exhaustive detail, the earth neighborhood by neighborhood, starting with Australia. It is also incredibly dull, tedious to the point of being unreadable. The narrator, writing of a conversation about the poem with Daneri, comes to understand that, "“el trabajo del poeta no

³⁴ "Universal space... with no diminution of size" (CF 283).

³⁵ "To versify the entire planet" (CF 277).

estaba en la poesía; estaba en la invención de razones para que la poesía fuera admirable; naturalmente, ese ulterior trabajo modificaba la obra para él, pero no para otros” (A 181).³⁷ Nobody could deny that Daneri’s poem is an accurate representation of reality, but that accuracy renders it irrelevant, a mere tautology. Daneri is more successful in his aim to take full advantage of the Aleph, but even in this endeavor his success is partial at best. The Aleph is both minute in scale—and as a result, easily apprehended—and infinite in detail. “La Tierra” is much the opposite, as the closer that Daneri comes to replicating the Aleph’s infinite depth, the more he sacrifices the scale by which it is possible to comprehend it at all. Daneri’s poem, if carried out to perfection, would not be a replica of the Aleph that exists in one point of space in his basement; rather, it would be a replica of the planet itself, in all its volume. His effort to exhaustively render the Aleph ultimately fails to represent that which is most striking about it.

Here, as in “Funes el memorioso,” the use of a narrator named Borges, who is also a secondary character, calls attention to the conflict between the story’s subject and its narrator, who subsumes him in an unfamiliar form. Funes’s infinite memories were circumscribed by a brief biographical essay; here, Carlos Argentino Daneri’s efforts at creating an epic poem are contained within the form of the short story. This difference in formal methodology is reflected in the tension between Borges and Daneri as characters, much of which is in fact based upon just such artistic considerations.

³⁶ “Picturesque digression and elegant apostrophe” (CF 276).

³⁷ “The work of the poet was not in the poetry, it was in the invention of reasons for which the poetry was admirable; naturally, this ulterior work modified the work for him, but not for others.”

Borges differs from Daneri in his attempts to represent both the Aleph and the memory of Beatriz. The fundamental distinction between the two characters, that which perhaps creates and certainly fuels the mutual antagonism between them, is the ability to forget. Both Daneri and Borges have the experience of seeing the Aleph, of perceiving the universe in its totality, but it is only Borges who pulls back from that experience, who distances himself from it. In this sense, “El Aleph” recalls Borges’s suggestive conflation of forgetting with thinking in “Funes el memorioso.” Daneri’s entire project in “La Tierra” operates as a refusal to forget, its tedium a function of the insistence that every detail perceived in the Aleph holds equal weight. Borges experiences this sort of hyperactive mania shortly after he looks upon the Aleph in Daneri’s basement. He writes of boarding a subway on his way home that, “me parecieron familiares todas las caras. Temí que no quedara una sola cosa capaz de sorprenderme, temí que no me abandonara jamás la impresión de volver” (A 195).³⁸ This fear is short-lived, however, as he reports: “felizmente, al cabo de unas noches de insomnio, me trabajó otra vez el olvido” (A 195).³⁹ The idea of “olvido”—variously translated as “forgetting” and “oblivion”—is precisely what separates Borges from Daneri.

Like Daneri, Borges attempts to put his experience with the Aleph into writing. Unlike Daneri, though, Borges acknowledges the impossibility of truly capturing exactly what he has seen. Regarding this impossibility, Borges writes: “arribo, ahora, al inefable centro de mi relato; empieza, aquí. mi desesperación de

³⁸ “All faces seemed familiar to me. I feared that there would not remain a single thing capable of surprising me, I feared that the impression of returning would never again abandon me.”

escritor.... Lo que vieron mis ojos fue simultáneo: lo que transcribiré, sucesivo, porque el lenguaje lo es. Algo, sin embargo, recogeré” (A 191-192).⁴⁰ Borges understands that there is an essential incompatibility between a phenomenon like the Aleph and the realm of linguistic representation. Rather than try to minimize this incompatibility, as Daneri does, through the rhetorical extravagance and craft that are the poetic fiber of “La Tierra,” Borges draws attention to his own inadequacy at conveying what he has seen. Borges narrates his experience of seeing the Aleph by means of “la enumeración, siquiera parcial, de un conjunto infinito” (A 191).⁴¹ The list that ensues manages to convey a measure of Borges’s wonder at the vast scope of the Aleph as well as to reveal as much about the narrator himself as it does about the Aleph. Borges allows himself to forget, and for that reason the list of things that he sees in the Aleph, enumerated plainly, is compelling where Daneri’s poem is tedious. By presenting his list as self-consciously incomplete, by framing it as a function of his own mental processes, Borges’s list, filled with references to the fascinations of both Borges the narrator and Borges the ultimate author of the story, gains a resonance that would be entirely absent from a more faithful representation. Borges’s narration of the story itself demonstrates the fertile creative possibilities of a certain distance from the subject of representation. Although the story is filled with long lists, it does not renounce the abstractions and elisions that come with forgetting.

³⁹ “Happily, at the end of a few nights of insomnia, oblivion once again worked over me.”

⁴⁰ “I come now to the ineffable center of my tale; it is here that a writer’s hopelessness begins.... What my eyes saw was *simultaneous*; what I shall write is *successive*, because language is successive. Something of it, though, I will capture” (CF 282-283).

⁴¹ “The enumeration, even if partial, of an infinite set.” Translation mine to preserve literal meaning.

The writings of Borges (the author) on Dante, to whom allusions abound in “El Aleph,” further illuminate the distinction between Daneri and Borges (the narrator). The Dantean subtext in “El Aleph” is immediately apparent in two instances. The author clearly links Carlos Argentino Daneri to Dante—both in his name, which appears to be an elision of Dante Alighieri, and his Italian background. The narrator, who pines for a dead, unrequited love named Beatriz, is no less closely associated with the author of the *Divine Comedy*. But more important than these superficial allusions is the split identified in Borges’s essays between two ways of thinking about Dante, a split which prefigures the methodological divide between Borges and Daneri. In the prologue to his collected essays on Dante, Borges implores the reader to imagine “una obra mágica, una lámina que también fuera un microcosmo,” and declares that “el poema de Dante es esa lámina de ámbito universal” (*NED* 85).⁴² Daneri appears to be a writer in line with this sort of thinking about the *Divine Comedy*. While “La Tierra” is surely too sprawling to be any sort of microcosm, Daneri’s fixation on the Aleph and the purpose of his poem would imply that he is at the least a writer of Dantean ambitions. If he falls short of his predecessor, he could still function as a sort of minor descendent of Dante.

But Borges quickly negates this type of thinking, suggesting that if readers of the *Divine Comedy* could “leerlo con inocencia (pero esa felicidad nos está vedada), lo universal no sería lo primero que notaríamos y mucho menos lo sublime o

⁴² Jorge Luis Borges, *Nueve ensayos dantescos*, 85. Hereafter cited (*NED*). “A magical work, a panel that is also a microcosm: Dante’s poem is that panel whose edges enclose the universe” (*SN-F* 268).

grandioso” (*NED* 85-86).⁴³ Borges’s alternative reading of Dante, which he traces back to the British tradition of Dante scholarship, relies less on the *Divine Comedy*’s magnitude and its capacity to represent the world, and more on its creativity, on the appreciation of “la variada y afortunada invención de rasgos precisos” (*NED* 86).⁴⁴ Ever skeptical of the ability of art to encapsulate the complexity of reality, Borges is less interested in the epic grandeur of the *Divine Comedy*, than in the highly crafted individual stories that comprise the poem. Under this line of thought, it is Borges (the narrator) who is closer to Dante in his efforts to represent the Aleph. Borges’s fragmented list is composed entirely of the precise features that he finds most noteworthy in the Aleph. By abandoning any ambition to contain the entirety of his experience, he ensures the value of the specific facets of that experience he chooses to represent.

The crux of Borges’s interpretation of Dante is his analysis of the poet’s relation to Beatrice, which he considers not in terms of Dante’s love for her but rather in terms of his distance from her, her complete inaccessibility to him. Borges speculates that “Dante edificó el mejor libro que la literatura ha alcanzado para intercalar algunos encuentros con la irrecuperable Beatriz” (*NED* 158).⁴⁵ The work of art in this case lies not in the representation of the real world but rather in the recreation of something lost. Dante, of course, cannot truly recover Beatrice, he can only create a warped image of her, which even within his own poem he can attain

⁴³ “To read it in innocence (but that happiness is barred to us), it’s universality would not be the first thing we would notice, and still less its grandiose sublimity” (*SN-F* 268).

⁴⁴ “The varied and felicitous invention of precise traits” (*SN-F* 268).

⁴⁵ “Dante constructed the best book literature has achieved in order to interpolate into it a few encounters with the irrecuperable Beatrice” (*SN-F* 303).

only momentarily, under fraught circumstances. What happens to Dante is, “lo que suele ocurrir en los sueños, manchándolo de tristes estorbos” (*NED* 152).⁴⁶ Dante, having lost her, “soñó con Beatriz, pero la soñó severísima, pero la soñó inaccesible: (*NED* 152).⁴⁷ Thus the *Divine Comedy*—focused for Borges on the character of Beatrice—is not a meticulously constructed representation of Dante’s world, nor even a faithful reconstruction of his lost love. It is instead something new, created with Beatrice in mind but transformed in the process.

Much the same could be said of Borges’s representation of Beatriz in “El Aleph,” which is made possible by her very absence. Upon her death, he notes that, “alguna vez, lo sé, mi vana devoción la había exasperado; muerta yo podía consagrarme a su memoria, sin esperanza, pero también sin humillación” (*A* 176).⁴⁸ Over the course of the story Borges subtly creates a portrait of Beatriz. In one early scene, Borges lists a series of photographs he contemplates:

“Beatriz Viterbo, de perfil, en colores; Beatriz, con antifaz, en los carnavales de 1921; la primera comunión de Beatriz; Beatriz, el día de su boda con Roberto Alessandri; Beatriz, poco después del divorcio, en un almuerzo del Club Hípico” (*A* 176).⁴⁹

Read as a description of Beatriz herself rather than a mere listing of photographs, this list mirrors the form of his depiction of the Aleph. Borges selects a handful of

⁴⁶ “What often happens in dreams: they are stained by sad obstructions” (*SN-F* 300).

⁴⁷ “He dreamed of Beatrice, but dreamed her as terribly severe, dreamed her as inaccessible” (*SN-F* 300).

⁴⁸ “I knew that more than once my futile devotion had exasperated her; now that she was dead I could consecrate myself to her memory—without hope, but also without humiliation” (*CF* 274).

⁴⁹ “Beatriz Biterbo, in profile, in color; Beatriz in a mask at the Carnival of 1921; Beatriz’ first communion; Beatriz on the day of her wedding to Roberto Alessandri; Beatriz shortly after the divorce, lunching at the Jockey Club” (*CF* 274).

discrete moments that, as he is well aware, cannot convey the complexity of the infinite series from which they come. By deliberately limiting the extent of his list—and in this he once again distinguishes himself from Daneri—Borges allows his representations a degree of independence. His distance from Beatriz prevents his representation of her from being faithful, but it permits it to be revealing. The Beatriz that we see in “El Aleph,” then, is not the “real” Beatriz, but she is Borges’s Beatriz. If he does not accurately represent her, he creates a portrait of her *as she existed for him*. Borges recognizes that he cannot recover Beatriz, particularly because he never possessed her in the first place.

Borges is able to limit his representation of Beatriz because, as he writes at the end of the story, “nuestra mente es porosa para el olvido; yo mismo estoy falseando y perdiendo, bajo la trágica erosión de los años, los rasgos de Beatriz” (A 198).⁵⁰ Unlike Funes or Daneri, Borges is able to step away the brink of total perception. Just as forgetting is for Borges the beginning of thought, this step away from the Aleph is the beginning of artistic creation. By beginning to forget Beatriz, Borges is able to put her into his writing, and not as the dull enumeration of features and qualities that Daneri would compose. If Ireneo Funes and Carlos Argentino Daneri show the unmanageability of surplus, the figure of Borges himself demonstrates the negative space that is an incredibly fertile ground for creative representation. There is a modesty to this approach that affords Borges a certain freedom. The image of Beatriz that he creates in the pages of “El Aleph” is a different sort of representation, one that has both a distinct identity and a clear link back to its referent.

⁵⁰ “Our minds are permeable to forgetfulness; I myself am distorting and losing, through the tragic erosion of the years, the features of Beatriz” (CF 286).

In his essays on Dante and in “El Aleph,” Borges outlines the forms of two opposed understandings of the origins and workings of literature. The first is exemplified by the former reading of Dante, in which the *Divine Comedy* functions as a microcosm for the exterior world, and personified in “El Aleph” by Carlos Argentino Daneri, whose “La Tierra,” whether it succeeds or not, certainly has ambitions of this type of grandeur. In this way of thinking, literature functions as an accurate representation of its subject, which the author has perceived clearly in its entirety. Borges’s essayistic stories such as “La Biblioteca de Babel” and “Funes el memorioso” articulate a critique of the complete apprehension that is the foundation of this type of writing, demonstrating that representability and communicability do not actually increase without limit as the accuracy and completeness of perception increase. Daneri finds a somewhat artificial way around these problems, but he is only able to achieve this solution by way of his access to a magical object, and the results are without much merit anyway. Borges, on the other hand, avoids the problems posed by the Aleph by refusing to attempt a faithful representation at all. Borges finds—or, in the terminology he uses elsewhere, creates—a predecessor for this mode of writing in his counter-reading of Dante. This mode of literature operates by falsifying, forgetting, and redacting rather than mimesis. The goal is not so much the representation of something that is present, but the recreation, in different form, of something that has been lost.

“Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote”

“Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote,” the first story Borges wrote during the roughly fifteen-year period of incredible creative fertility that constitutes a large part

of his legacy, makes use of both the essayistic form of “La Biblioteca de Babel” and “Funes el memorioso,” and the conceptual richness of “El Aleph,” although it predates all three. The titular Pierre Menard is a minor French symbolist poet, a friend of Valéry, and the story is styled as a review of his work, which the anonymous narrator offers as a corrective to other, apparently misinformed commentaries. Menard, we can infer, is recently deceased, and already his body of work has become the site of contestation in his absence. The narrator reveals the tenor of this debate in the first sentence, when he asserts that “son... imperdonables las omisiones y adiciones perpetradas por Madame Henri Bachelier en un catálogo falaz” (*F* 41).⁵¹ The use here of hyperbole and the resort to ad hominem attacks that follows shortly after notify the reader of the intensity with which the various critics dispute the proper way of reading Menard. This intensity, if not the acrimony it inspires, may well be fitting, as Menard’s writing seems to be focused precisely on articulating methods of reading.

Menard’s work, the reviewer claims, is divided into the categories of visible and invisible. The visible portion of his writing is composed of a handful of short pieces, the majority of which are in some way commentaries on another text. While these pieces can serve to enrich the analysis of Menard,⁵² the narrator is most interested in his invisible body of work, invisible both because it was left incomplete at Menard’s death and because it is not immediately obvious that it is in fact the work

⁵¹ “Unpardonable... are the omissions and additions perpetrated by Mme. Henri Bachelier in a deceitful catalog” (*CF* 88).

⁵² Borges writes in the prologue to *Ficciones* that the list of Menard’s writing “no es demasiado divertida pero no es arbitraria; es un diagrama de su historia mental” (*F* 12). [It is not terribly amusing, but it is not arbitrary, either; it is a diagram of his mental history” (*CF* 67).]

of Menard. This invisible work is composed of “los capítulos noveno y trigésimo octavo de la primera parte del don Quijote y de un fragmento del capítulo veintidós” (*F* 45-46).⁵³ These fragments indicate the nature of the incomplete work—it was Menard’s intention to recompose, with perfect accuracy, Cervantes’ *Quixote*.

Menard’s method, contrary to appearances, is not to copy or transcribe Cervantes, but rather a more ambitious, grandiose process. Menard’s initial plan is, through deliberate anachronism, to become Miguel de Cervantes, but he soon rejects this idea as too simple (*F* 47-48). He prefers instead to “seguir siendo Pierre Menard y llegar al Quijote, a través de las experiencias de Pierre Menard” (*F* 48).⁵⁴ Menard’s *Quixote*, then, is an attempt at a truly faithful representation of Cervantes’ novel. This is the source of one of the primary points of contention between the narrator and the other commentators against whom he positions himself, who seem to have asserted that Menard was writing a contemporary *Quixote*, “uno de esos libros parasitarios que sitúan a Cristo en un bulevar, a Hamlet en la Cannebière o a don Quijote en Wall Street” (*F* 46).⁵⁵ Menard—the narrator protests—“como todo hombre de buen gusto... abominaba de esos carnavales inútiles” (*F* 46).⁵⁶ What is at stake in this dispute is the mode by which Menard’s *Quixote* represents that of Cervantes. It is crucial to the narrator’s understanding of Menard’s work that his *Quixote* is both verbally coincident with and at the same time distinct from Cervantes’ *Quixote*. It is for this reason that he must deny the claims that Menard’s work is a contemporary

⁵³ “The ninth and thirty-eight chapters of Part I of *Don Quixote* and a fragment of Chapter XXII” (*CF* 90).

⁵⁴ “Continuing to be Pierre Menard and coming to the *Quixote through the experiences of Pierre Menard*” (*CF* 91).

⁵⁵ “One of those parasitic books that set Christ on a boulevard, Hamlet on La Cannebière, or don Quixote on Wall Street” (*CF* 90).

parody of the Quixote, and at the same time, by his exposition of Menard's methods, assert its essential difference from its predecessor.

Menard's extreme methodology is his way of ensuring that the *Quixote* he creates is a product of his own mind, not that of Cervantes. The necessity of this proposition is demonstrated by Menard's decision that he must "excluir el prólogo autobiográfico de la segunda parte del Don Quijote. Incluir ese prólogo... hubiera significado presentar el Quijote en función de [Cervantes] y no de Menard" (F 48).⁵⁷ Menard's ownership of his creation is of the utmost importance to the narrator, who declares that "el texto de Cervantes y el de Menard son verbalmente idénticos, pero el segundo es casi infinitamente más rico" (F 52).⁵⁸ The latter text, as the narrator reads it, has all the weight of the three hundred years of history, literature, and culture between Menard and Cervantes endowing it with new subtleties and resonances.

The ways in which Menard has thus enriched the Quixote, merely by rewriting it, remain ambiguous. James E. Irby notes the paradox "that Menard... has written (not transcribed, but produced independently) some fragments of *Don Quixote* which are identical in wording to Cervantes' text and yet totally different and much richer in meaning."⁵⁹ Irby asks, "how are we to understand this?" and responds:

"the simplest way would be to replace the verb 'write' with 'read':
Pierre Menard *reads* the *Quixote* so carefully, so resourcefully, that he
leaves every word in place but accounts for it according to his

⁵⁶ "Like every man of taste... abominated those pointless travesties" (CF 90).

⁵⁷ "To leave out the autobiographical foreward to Part II of the novel. Including the prologue would have meant... presenting Quixote through [Cervantes'] eyes, not Pierre Menard's" (CF 91).

⁵⁸ "The Cervantes text and the Menard text are verbally identical, but the second is almost infinitely richer" (CF 94).

⁵⁹ James E. Irby, "Some Notes on 'Pierre Menard,'" p. 155.

Symbolist way of thinking, hence the simultaneous ‘sameness’ and ‘difference.’”⁶⁰

In Irby’s understanding—and the narrator’s—the heart of Menard’s achievement is the proposition of new ways of reading, of reading as a way of rewriting, hence the claim of Pierre Menard as the *author* of the *Quixote*.

Menard’s work is in reading the *Quixote* unmoored from the context in which Cervantes wrote it. The narrator claims that he has, “(acaso sin quererlo)... enriquecido mediante una técnica nueva el arte detenido y rudimentario de la lectura: la técnica del anacronismo deliberado y de las atribuciones erróneas” (*F* 55).⁶¹ The narrator, then, considers Menard’s *Quixote* as a perfect representation, one that is not only entirely faithful to its source, but independent, having its own identity and uses as well. Menard’s *Quixote*, of course, is not quite as complete as the narrator makes it out to be. Menard left only two chapters, far from the totality of Cervantes, and his decision to exclude the prologue suggests that his project may have been more fragmentary. But the narrator does not read Menard this way. He confesses: “suelo imaginar que la terminó y que leo el Quijote—todo el Quijote—como si lo hubiera pensado Menard” (*F* 48).⁶² This is the first hint that Menard’s *Quixote* exists more in theory, as an incitement to thought, than as an actual written text, and that the narrator might play as large a role as Menard in determining just what it means. Following the

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ “(Perhaps unwittingly) enriched the slow and rudimentary art of reading by means of a new technique—the technique of deliberate anachronism and fallacious attribution” (*CF* 95).

⁶² “I often imagine that he did complete it, and that I read the *Quixote*—the *entire* *Quixote*—as if Menard had conceived it” (*CF* 92).

narrator's line of thought, Menard would have overcome the problems inherent in representation while at the same time conforming to its strictest regulations.

The very nature of Menard's project and its challenge to typical assumptions about authorship and attribution, however, raise the question of whether he is truly responsible for the innovations credited to him, or whether there is another presence in the story, analogous to Borges in "El Aleph," who could claim responsibility for the artistry featured in the story. The narrator of the story—who is, after all, the one who brings the virtues of Menard's *Quixote* to the reader's attention in the first place—seems to fit the bill. In no part of the essay does the narrator acknowledge this potential, but over the course of a careful reading, the evidence mounts. The narrator's reticence, furthermore, would not be inconsistent with the modesty that characterizes his essay and his entire method of production, nor with a trait he admires in Menard: "su hábito resignado o irónico de propagar ideas que eran el estricto reverso de las preferidas por él" (*F* 52).⁶³ If one can grant that Menard's representation of a text already written by Cervantes has virtues of its own, it follows that a review of Menard's text—a rewrite of a rewrite—can likewise enrich Menard's *Quixote*, with the added benefit of avoiding Menard's form of tautological representation. The many virtues of Menard's work are, in fact, made explicit only in the process of analysis. Until the narrator draws out its richness, Menard's text is entirely identical to Cervantes' *Quixote*.

The narrator's essay, furthermore, has its own virtues independent of Menard's work. To demonstrate this proposition, it is sufficient to remember that

⁶³ "His resigned or ironic habit of putting forth ideas that were the exact opposite of those he actually held" (*CF* 93).

Menard is in the end a fictional character, his work not existent, while the story “Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote” has proved a fertile source of literary thought and innovation. Even if the reader should grant that Menard’s *Quixote*, if it were to exist, would have the value that the narrator attributes to it, it is undeniable that its review exhibits the same value with far greater wit, clarity, and concision. If Menard enriches the act of reading with his technique of false attribution, “Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote” enriches literature with the device of reviewing fictional books, to which category Menard’s *Quixote* ultimately belongs. Borges did not invent this device, but he did illuminate its dizzying potential in this story. Describing a crucial difference between his own fictions and those of his predecessors, Borges comments that “así procedió Carlyle en *Sartor Resartus*; así Butler en *The Fair Haven*; obras que tienen la imperfección de ser libros también, no menos tautológicos que los otros... he preferido la escritura de notas sobre libros imaginarios” (F 12).⁶⁴ By virtue of his story’s brevity, Borges demonstrates the fictional review’s capacity to present complex ideas in an accessible, condensed form. This technique is a staple of Borges’s subsequent fiction, appearing notably in stories such as “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” “La obra de Herbert Quain,” and “Tres versiones de Judas.”⁶⁵ The fictionality of Pierre Menard does not invalidate the insights of the essay.

“Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote,” in fact, derives strength from the nonexistence of its ostensible subject. While Pierre Menard aims to recreate the real,

⁶⁴ “That was Carlyle’s procedure in *Sartor Resartus*, Butler’s in *The Fair Haven*—though those works suffer under the imperfection that they themselves are books, and not a whit less tautological than the others... I have chosen to write notes on *imaginary books*” (CF 67).

⁶⁵ The same device is also present in the works of authors such as Vladimir Nabokov, Italo Calvino, and Stanislaw Lem.

exact Quixote of Cervantes, Borges aims to recreate the fictional Pierre Menard, freeing himself from the burdens and difficulties of accurate representation. The form of the book review, moreover, is by design a relatively marginal form, understood to be secondary to its subject. As in “Funes el memorioso” and “El Aleph,” Borges opposes the form of the work he discusses, in this case the modern novel, to the form of the discussion itself. By using the form of the review, Borges evades the danger of attempting—and almost certainly, to judge by the precedents depicted within Borges’s fiction, failing—to create a totalized representation of reality along the lines of the realist novel. By reviewing fictional books, furthermore, Borges evades any obligation to be accurate. When Roberto González-Echevarría suggests that Borges “[has] been writing from... a strategic marginality,”⁶⁶ he is referring to Borges’s positioning of himself at the margins of the European philosophical tradition, or the European tradition in general, but his notion of strategic marginality applies equally well to Borges’s formal maneuvering. Borges exploits the margins, finding in them the space for a critical literature that does not exhibit the same problems it critiques.

⁶⁶Roberto González-Echevarría, “Borges and Derrida,” p. 232.

Chapter Two

In Roberto Bolaño's novels, as in Borges's stories, there is a consistent preoccupation over the tangled relationship between so-called reality and intellectual efforts to represent it. One trope that recurs throughout Bolaño's work, and distinguishes it from that of Borges, is the problem inherent in representing a political reality of atrocities, violence, and repression.⁶⁷ The substance of this problem, as it does in Borges, relates both to the difficulty of creating such a representation and to the ultimate uses to which such a representation can be put. The visceral horror provoked in Bolaño's work by violence resists contemplation, comprehension, and thus, representation. Furthermore, in these novels, to create a representation of a political regime is, in a sense, to reproduce the conditions of that regime. As the force and power of the representation increases, as it comes closer and closer to coinciding with the reality it depicts, the representation itself approaches a simulacrum that has the same relation to its readers as a repressive government to its subjects.

⁶⁷ Violence is central to a number of Borges's stories as well—among them “El Sur,” “La muerte y la brújula,” and “El milagro secreto”—but it does not seem to play the

Estrella distante

One novel, *Estrella distante*, illuminates these tensions especially well, positioning the lives of Chilean poets against a backdrop of state violence and oppression. To represent the nature of Chilean political reality during the Pinochet years, it seems, is to mimic the violence of the regime itself. This is a desirable outcome for Carlos Wieder—a right-wing poet and member of the military—who is able to reconcile aesthetics and politics with no subordination of one to the other. For the narrator and his friend Bibiano O’Ryan—leftist student poets—the example of Wieder demarcates the limits of their art. They can neither achieve the aesthetic purity nor the ideological focus that Wieder joins together in his performative poetry.

In the story of Carlos Wieder, the novel’s shadowy protagonist, Bolaño creates an explicit manifestation of the affinity between art—even and especially in its most avant-garde forms—and the atrocities perpetrated by the military government. Wieder demonstrates this affinity so well because his poetry is linked directly to his covert participation in military death squads. For Wieder, unlike many of the other poets present in Bolaño’s work, there is no need to reconcile an aesthetic vocation with a brutal reality; for him, the two are already coincident. In Wieder’s life and in his work, poetry and violence cannot be separated. Wieder’s acts of violence form the basis of his very identity as a poet, the subject matter of his work, and its means of transmission.

The true birth of Carlos Wieder as a poet is marked within the narrative of *Estrella distante* precisely at the moment he murders the Garmendia sisters, twin

same sort of fundamental role in the problems of representation *as such* that it does in the novels of Bolaño.

poets who participate in the same poetry workshop as the narrator, O’Ryan, and Carlos Wieder himself, under a pseudonym. In the beginning of the novel, Wieder is known to the narrator as Alberto Ruiz-Tagle, and is characterized by a certain shyness and hesitation, both in his personality and in his art. A mutual friend tells the narrator that Ruiz-Tagle’s poems read “como si no fueran poemas suyos... suyos de verdad,” and later insists that he will go on, after a breakthrough, to revolutionize Chilean poetry.⁶⁸ Shortly after Pinochet takes power, however, Wieder comes to exhibit the characteristics that will identify him throughout the rest of the novel. This shift, as imagined by the narrator, begins with his murder of the Garmendia twins, which, decades later, will be linked inconclusively to “un grupo operativo independiente responsable de la muerte de varios estudiantes en el area de Concepción y en Santiago” (ED 116).⁶⁹

In a conjectural reconstruction of Wieder’s visit, the narrator imagines the two sisters sitting down with their ostensible friend to share their recent poetry. After the twins read their newest poems, they implore Wieder to read some of his own. He refuses, insisting that “está a punto de concluir algo nuevo, que hasta no tenerlo terminado y corregido prefiere no airearlo” (ED 30).⁷⁰ This is the last point in which the reader is presented with the hesitant figure of the first chapter, better identified as

⁶⁸ Roberto Bolaño, *Estrella distante*, p. 24. Hereafter cited parenthetically (ED). All translations cited from Andrews unless noted otherwise. “As if they weren’t his poems. His real poems.” *Distant Star*, Trans. Chris Andrews, p. 24. Hereafter cited parenthetically (DS).

⁶⁹ “An ‘independent operational group’ responsible for the death of various students in and around Concepción and Santiago” (DS 108).

⁷⁰ “He has nearly finished something new, but until it is finished and corrected, he would prefer not to talk about it” (DS 20). To translate “airar” as “to talk about” fails to convey its double meaning. The literal meaning of the word, to ventilate or to aerate, prefigures Wieder’s plan to mix poetry with skywriting.

Alberto Ruiz-Tagle than by his later name. At this moment the narrator remarks, perhaps ironically, that “está a punto de nacer la ‘nueva poesía chilena’” (*ED* 30).⁷¹ The three poets will soon retire for the night. When Ruiz-Tagle wakes up to murder the residents of the house, the time will have come in which “ya debería empezar a llamarle Carlos Wieder” (*ED* 31).⁷² Carlos Wieder’s artistic identity, then, begins at this moment, in the act of murder.

This violence not only provides a biographical point of origin for Wieder, it permeates his actual body of work as well. Shortly after the murder of the Garmendias, Wieder begins a series of poetic acts that will win him both public fame and approval from the government. In these acts, Wieder flies what seems to be a Messerschmitt 109, a fighter jet used by the Luftwaffe during the early years of World War II, through the sky of Concepción, writing poetry in Latin with the smoke from his engine. In the very means by which it is made public, Wieder’s poetry is rooted in a history of violence and oppression. The instrument of its creation harkens back to Nazi Germany and its spectacular medium more particularly recalls the Luftwaffe’s purported strategy of “terror bombing,” in which planes were equipped with sirens and targeted civilians in order to damage enemy morale.⁷³ It also alludes to the twinned fascinations with airplanes and avant-garde formal experimentation among

⁷¹ “The ‘New Chilean Poetry’ is about to be born” (*DS* 20).

⁷² “From here on I should call him Carlos Wieder” (*DS* 21).

⁷³ Scholars disagree on exactly when, if ever, the Luftwaffe began to use this strategy. Air power historian James Coburn notes that such tactics were specifically prohibited by Luftwaffe regulations, but concedes that the night attacks of British towns beginning in 1942 meet the standards of terror bombing. At any rate, this sort of tactics became engrained in the public memory of World War II, rightly or wrongly, and would certainly have been recognized in the style of a figure like Wieder. James S. Coburn, *The Luftwaffe: Creating the Operational Air War 1918-1940*.

Italian Futurists, many of whom were closely tied to Fascism.⁷⁴ In its mode of presentation, Wieder's poetry exercises a tyrannical authority over its audience. In acclaiming the greatness of the state, his poetry mimics its domination of the public. A reader can choose to pick up or put down a volume of traditional poetry; Wieder's poems, inscribed in the very public space of the sky, are imposed from without.

Political violence deeply informs the content of Wieder's work as well as its medium. In the first of the poems that he will write in the sky, Wieder quotes the first several verses of the Book of Genesis, in Latin (*ED* 39). Through both his source and his use of Latin, Wieder implies a new beginning that is also a return, in some way, to the classics. It is only later that Wieder reveals explicitly the cost of such a new beginning. In the last of these poems, Wieder exhorts death, which he implies is necessary for the rebirth he speaks of earlier. The full text of the poem reads:

“La muerte es amistad/ La muerte es Chile/ La muerte es
responsabilidad/ La muerte es amor/ La muerte es crecimiento/ La
muerte es comunión/ La muerte es limpieza/ La muerte es mi corazón/
Toma mi corazón/ Carlos Wieder/ La muerte es resurrección” (*ED* 89-
91).⁷⁵

Marcelo Cohen describes Wieder's work as “un proyecto poético total que incluye la elevación de la poesía al firmamento y la sangre.”⁷⁶ Cohen perceptively notes the conflation of violence and artistic ambition in Wieder's poetry. He could add that

⁷⁴ For a more in-depth discussion of Futurist *aeropittura*, or aeropainting and its relation to Fascism, see Christine Poggi, *Futurism: An Anthology*, p. 327-328.

⁷⁵ “Death is friendship/ Death is Chile/ Death is responsibility/ Death is love/ Death is growth/ Death is communion/ Death is cleansing/ Death is my heart/ Take my heart/ Carlos Wieder/ Death is resurrection” (*DS* 80-82).

⁷⁶ Marcelo Cohen, “Donde mueren los poetas,” p. 33. “A total poetic project which includes the elevation of poetry to the firmament and to the blood.”

both the violence and the ambition of Wieder's poetry are entirely congruent with his political participation in the military government.

This fascination with death on a thematic level is reflected as well in the subject matter of Wieder's poems. Bibiano O'Ryan, having begun to suspect that Wieder is Ruiz-Tagle, hears of a conversation in which the poet declares that "las Garmendia están muertas... la Villagrán también... todas las poetisas están muertas" (*ED* 49).⁷⁷ O'Ryan correlates this conversation with numerous oblique references in Wieder's poems to the Garmendia sisters and to other murdered women, by which Wieder's most intimate friends—and the obsessive Bibiano O'Ryan—are able to discern that "Wieder estaba nombrando, conjurando, a mujeres muertas" (*ED* 43).⁷⁸ These women are conjured even more explicitly by the photographic exhibition that Wieder mounts after his final sky-writing performance. This exhibition consists of the four walls of Wieder's apartment, covered in photographs of murdered women, among whom spectators recognize the Garmendia sisters and other disappeared women (*ED* 97). This exhibition, which Wieder calls "poesía visual, experimental, quintaesenciada, arte puro, algo que iba a divertirlos a todos" (*ED* 87),⁷⁹ literalizes the implicit connection between his poetry and his acts of violence. Wieder here creates a sinister variant of the common poetic trope in which a woman, often the poet's lost love, is the inspiration or even the subject of the poem. Borges presents his own version of this trope in stories like "El Aleph" as a way of understanding the

⁷⁷ "The Garmendia sisters are dead... Carmen Villagrán too... all the girls who wrote poetry are dead" (*DS* 39).

⁷⁸ "Some of those who were close to Wieder, however, were aware that he was conjuring up the shades of dead women" (*DS* 33).

⁷⁹ "Visual poetry—experimental, quintessential, art for art's sake... everyone would find it amusing" (*DS* 78).

unbridgeable distance between the author and his subject. In the case of Wieder, however, the poet himself is responsible for the distance between himself and the missing woman, and his poetry reifies that distance. There is a symbiotic relation between Wieder's crimes and his writing. By aestheticizing death in his poetry, he provides the justification for his murders, which in turn consecrate the value of that poetry.

With Carlos Wieder, Bolaño has created a composite figure who embodies diverse historical and cultural formations of the avant-garde. Ina Jennerjahn refers to

“la superposición de intertextos diferentes y contrarios... el resultado de la cita, por un lado, del discurso de la vanguardia histórica de la derecha y, por el otro, de la práctica de la neovanguardia chilena de los años setenta y comienzos de los ochenta.”⁸⁰

Wieder's cooperation with Pinochet's government recalls, for instance, Marinetti's engagement with Fascism. On the other hand, in his methods, as Jennerjahn points out, Wieder bears a strong resemblance to the “escena avanzada,” a leftist Chilean avant-garde movement that resisted Pinochet. Wieder seems especially similar to Raúl Zurita, one of the most prominent figures of the “escena avanzada”—Jennerhan cites Zurita's famous performance of sky-writing poetry in New York and notes as

⁸⁰ Ina Jennerjahn, “Escritos en los cielos y fotografías del infierno. Las ‘Acciones de arte’ de Carlos Ramírez Hoffman, según Roberto Bolaño,” p. 79. “The superposition of different and contrary intertexts upon each other... the result of the quotation on the one hand of the discourse of the historic vanguard of the right, and on the other of the praxis of the Chilean neo-vanguard of the seventies and early eighties.” Jennerjahn's essay regards the last chapter of Bolaño's *Literatura nazi en America* (*Nazi Literature in the Americas*). Bolaño later expanded and slightly modified this chapter into *Estrella distante*. The poetry of Ramírez Hoffman is functionally identical to that of Wieder, and Jennerjahn's observations regarding the former are perfectly applicable to the latter.

well that Wieder's poems "muestran obvias analogías con los de Zurita."⁸¹ The conflation of these opposed traditions engenders a certain skepticism regarding the possibilities of poetry, or art in general, in the face of totalitarian government.

Wieder's poetry, it must be noted, is a perfect simulacrum of the political climate in which it is created. His participation in a military death squad reads as functionally inseparable from his later photographic documentary art and from his performative poetry. Cohen describes him as "un posible vanguardista ideal, el que realiza el asesinato de la lengua en el despedazamiento de cuerpos."⁸² In this context, Wieder recalls Breton's maxim that "the simplest Surrealist act consists of dashing down into the street, pistol in hand, and firing blindly, as fast as you can pull the trigger, into the crowd."⁸³ But while the Surrealist connection to governments and viable political movements was tenuous at best, Wieder is a highly ranked member of the Chilean military, and his killings are in the service of this capacity rather than randomly motivated.

Wieder's work is not "compromised" or "engaged" in the traditional sense because there is no division between its political ends and its aesthetic means. The goals of the military government and of the avant-garde poet merge seamlessly. Wieder appropriates the methods of resistance developed by the "escena avanzada" for the benefit of the government they fought, and demonstrates the furthest extension of a vanguardist rhetoric, justifying murder as an act of high art within his own perverse internal logic. In this capacity he looms large over the other poets in the

⁸¹ Ibid. "Show obvious analogies with those of Zurita."

⁸² Marcelo Cohen, "Donde mueren los poetas," p. 34. "A possible ideal vanguardist, one who achieves the assassination of language in the destruction of bodies."

⁸³ André Breton, "The Second Surrealist Manifesto," p. 29.

novel. Wieder demonstrates that a truly faithful representation of a repressive, violent government must be violent and repressive in its own right. In light of this revelation, the narrator and Bibiano O’Ryan must eschew the definitive types of artistic statements Wieder makes. Their own writing will be, unlike Wieder’s, highly circumspect. In their hands poetry will not achieve the totalizing rigor it finds in Wieder, and history will remain largely conjectural. Furthermore, in their practice there will exist an unbridgeable divide between their literature and their political circumstances.

In the career of Bibiano O’Ryan, for instance, there is a refusal both to directly represent political reality in literature and to become involved in that reality by any means other than literature. Prior to the advent of Pinochet, the narrator describes his poetic cohort—and here he surely includes Bibiano O’Ryan, his best friend—as talking obsessively, “no sólo de poesía, sino de política... de revolución y lucha armada; la lucha armada que nos iba a traer una nueva vida y una nueva época” (*ED* 13).⁸⁴ After the coup, however, Bibiano will largely abandon any attempt at uniting literary obsessions with political ones or at participating in the politics of his country as anything other than a spectator. The example of Carlos Wieder seems to have weighed on Bibiano O’Ryan’s mind—he obsessively tracks down any trace of the increasingly marginal and mysterious Wieder decades after he disappears from the public eye, and his literary production seems to be a conscious retreat in the face of Wieder’s example. If Wieder demonstrated that literature can represent political violence with a degree of fidelity such that literature becomes violent itself, Bibiano’s

⁸⁴ “Not just about poetry, but politics... revolution and the armed struggle that would usher in a new life and a new era” (*DS* 3).

artistic choices appear to be a step away from this extreme, towards a literature concerned less with exterior political reality, more with literature and literary conventions themselves.

This retreat is evident the last time that the narrator, about to leave Chile for good, sees Bibiano O’Ryan. O’Ryan is staying in Chile, and has taken a job in a shoe store. There is a slight edge of mockery detectable in the tone of the narrator as he speaks of his friend’s literary output, as if he were taken aback by the inconsequentiality of it all. Bibiano describes his goals, one of which is to write “en inglés fábulas que transcurrirían en la campiña irlandesa” (ED 52).⁸⁵ Another ambition is to learn French well enough to read Stendhal—the narrator remarks that he dreams of “encerrarse *dentro* de Stendhal y dejar que pasaran los años” (ED 52).⁸⁶ In this ambition, Bibiano O’Ryan literalizes his retreat, imagining that he could actually reside within a work of fiction. Furthermore, he denies any applicability of literature to his everyday surroundings by abandoning his own language in favor of English and French, languages to which his primary relation is a literary one. While previously in the novel he speaks almost exclusively of Chilean poets, here he focuses his literary preferences not just outside of Chile, but outside of the Spanish language in general. Gone as well are any radical tendencies; in a letter to the narrator, Bibiano declares that, “el trato con los libros... exige una cierta sedentariidad, un cierto grado de aburguesamiento necesario” (ED 76).⁸⁷ This change of concentration implies a hesitance to translate the horrors of Pinochet’s Chile into literature, and also, perhaps,

⁸⁵ “Fables in English that would be set in the Irish countryside.” Translation mine to preserve the connotations of “fábula.”

⁸⁶ “Barricading himself inside Stendhal and letting the years go by” (DS 42).

a fear of redundancy. Carlos Wieder has already created the definitive artistic document of the Pinochet regime and has also demonstrated the ends of such an approach.

While this retreat into foreign literature appears at odds with O’Ryan’s continued fascination with Carlos Wieder, it actually is entirely in line with O’Ryan’s passive observation of the fascist poet. From the moment he arrives in the public eye, Wieder exerts a near-magnetic pull on Bibiano, who is among first to suspect his criminal activity. O’Ryan persistently gathers as much information as he can about Wieder’s victims, long after the perpetrator has vanished from Chile. When Wieder refers to a “Patricia” in one of his early poems, O’Ryan identifies her as Patricia Méndez, a young poet who has recently disappeared. He even, years later, tracks down her mother, whom he interviews about her daughter and her possible connection to Wieder (*ED* 42). After Wieder disappears from the spotlight, Bibiano O’Ryan obsessively collects the scattered, pseudonymous traces he leaves, among them a handful of short plays attributed to the name Octavio Pacheco (*ED* 103-104) and two strategic war games (*ED* 108-109). There is, however, no practical aspect of this obsession. In the 1990s two judges attempt to try Wieder for his crimes, although there has been no trace of him in Chile for decades (*ED* 119-120). The narrator offers no evidence that Bibiano O’Ryan is involved in any way in these cases, even though he is likely the world’s only expert on the suspect. He astutely compares O’Ryan’s

⁸⁷ “If books and reading are what count, you have to lead a sedentary, middle-class life to some degree” (*DS* 68).

fascination with Wieder to “la pasión y la dedicación de un filatelista” (*ED* 53).⁸⁸ This comparison conveys both O’Ryan’s obsession and its sedentary, detached nature.

Bibiano O’Ryan’s retreat into literature and his academic fascination with Carlos Wieder come together in his first published book, *El nuevo retorno de los brujos* (*The New Return of the Warlocks*), which is, “un ensayo ameno... sobre los movimientos literarios fascistas del Cono Sur entre 1972 y 1989” (*ED* 117).⁸⁹ While the publication of this book is undeniably a more political act for O’Ryan than his fantasized disappearance into Stendhal, it is still a degree removed from a straightforward attempt at representing the political reality of the years it covers. O’Ryan shies away from explicitly discussing the history of the Pinochet era, analyzing instead the fascist literature that perhaps functions as a stand-in for the more complex reality. It is as if Bibiano, having absorbed the lessons of Carlos Wieder, understands that the reality of the Pinochet regime cannot be conveyed by ordinary literary means and settles for the secondary task of evaluating the attempts of other writers to somehow represent this reality.

If there were any moment in which O’Ryan’s study could transcend this secondary character, it would be in the chapter in Wieder, in whose work alone the representation of reality and its object manage to coincide. But O’Ryan’s chapter on Wieder is both the center of his book and the site of its ultimate failure. Wieder, as the fascist poet *par excellence*, is by necessity the most crucial figure of the book, the one “que se alza única de entre el vértigo y el balbuceo de la década maldita” (*ED*

⁸⁸ “The obsessive dedication of a stamp-collector” (*DS* 43).

⁸⁹ “A pleasant essay... about the fascist literary movements of the Southern Cone between 1972 and 1989.” Translation mine to preserve literal meaning.

117).⁹⁰ If O’Ryan cannot or will not represent the extra-literary world of South America in the 1970s and 1980s, neither can he quite get Carlos Wieder into his grasp—when O’Ryan confronts Wieder, “su descripción, las reflexiones que la poética de Wieder suscita en él son vacilantes, como si la presencia de éste lo turbara y lo hiciera perder el rumbo” (*ED* 117).⁹¹ Borges’s fiction repurposes seemingly inconsequential or secondary forms as a way of creating a subtle, nuanced critique, but this achievement comes in large part from the subversion of more ambitious forms within his fiction. It is difficult to judge Bibiano O’Ryan’s “pleasant essay” accurately, as it is only alluded to, never included or even excerpted, within *Estrella distante*. If it did achieve a Borgesian opposition between form and subject, however, *El nuevo retorno de los brujos* likely would make more of Wieder, who provides exactly the sort of totalized interpreter that frequently serves as a foil for Borges. Wieder ultimately eludes even his most dedicated critic: “nadie, y menos en literatura, es capaz de no parpadear durante un tiempo prolongado, y Wieder siempre se pierde” (*ED* 118).⁹² The memory of Carlos Wieder not only haunts Bibiano O’Ryan, it denies him the possibility of an equivalent response. In this context, literary production that exists at a remove from reality is not so much a personal preference as the only option available to O’Ryan.

While the narrator does become involved in direct action in a way that his friend does not, he faces many of the same issues as Bibiano with respect to his

⁹⁰ “[That] alone stands out clearly from the vertigo and babble of those accursed decades” (*DS* 108).

⁹¹ “[His] account of Wieder and his poetics is faltering, as if the presence of the aviator-poet has disturbed and disoriented him” (*DS* 109).

⁹² “Everyone blinks in the end... especially writers, and, as always, Wieder vanishes” (*DS* 109).

literary production. Like Bibiano, the narrator identifies himself principally as a poet, but the novel provides not a single example of his work. Moreover, at the moment in which he reenters the narrative as a principle character—living a nearly monastic life in Spain, about to be contacted by a detective to help find the long since vanished Wieder—the narrator seems to be at a particularly low ebb of creative production. As he begins working for Abel Romero, the detective who hires him to find traces of Wieder in various marginal right-wing literary magazines and newsletters, the narrator describes his current state: “vivía solo, no tenía dinero, mi salud dejaba bastante que desear, hacía mucho que no publicaba en ninguna parte, últimamente ya ni siquiera escribía. Mi destino me parecía miserable” (*ED* 130).⁹³ Bibiano and the narrator, then, both reach a point of artistic crisis. Bibiano’s response is to retreat into a self-referential literature that forsakes an explicit connection to the extra-literary world. The narrator’s response is to cease writing altogether.

Like his relative silence, the narrator’s willingness to become directly involved in the fate of Carlos Wieder distinguishes him from Bibiano O’Ryan. The narrator explicitly foregrounds this distinction by revealing that it was Bibiano who referred Romero to him. Romero, it turns out, has contacted Bibiano through a letter and spoken to him on the phone about Wieder. “Su amigo es una buena persona... y parece conocer muy bien al señor Wieder,” Romero tells the narrator, “pero cree que usted lo conoce mejor” (*ED* 126).⁹⁴ There is no evidence anywhere in the novel that suggests this statement is true—it is Bibiano who stays in Chile and obsessively

⁹³ “I was living on my own, had no money, and was in pretty poor health. None of my work had been published anywhere for ages, and for a while I hadn’t even been writing. My lot in life seemed miserable” (*DS* 121).

researches Carlos Wieder, not the narrator. Furthermore, up to this point in the novel, most of the information that the narrator relays about Wieder he has obtained second-hand through his friend. Bibiano's modesty seems to mask something else: a characteristic hesitation to be drawn into the conflict likely to ensue. The narrator is less circumspect—he initially expresses no reluctance to help Romero—but his involvement will later come to confound his literary faculties.

When he first begins to help Romero, the narrator pours himself into the work, finding in it a purpose that seems to have eluded him before. By the end of the affair, however, realizing the exact nature of his collaborative project with Romero, he loses much of his enthusiasm. The narrator, in an act of literary criticism as detective work, perceives the mark of Carlos Wieder in the writing of Jules Defoe, a member of an obscure group of “*escritores bárbaros*,” or barbarian writers, and Romero traces Defoe to the Spanish town of Blanes. All that remains is for the narrator to wait at Defoe's favorite bar to sight the poet and confirm that he is in fact Carlos Wieder, and, apparently, for Romero to ambush Wieder at his house and execute him. When the purpose of his trip to Blanes becomes clear to him, the narrator, as if reenacting the story of Judas, begs Romero not to kill Wieder. After the deed is presumably done, he tries to give back the money Romero has paid him. As he parts ways for the last time with Romero, the narrator describes the whole process as “[un] asunto... particularmente espantoso” (*ED* 157).⁹⁵ The narrator here has distanced himself from his friend's passivity, but he does not seem to believe that he is the better for it.

⁹⁴ “He's a good man, your friend... and although he seems to know a great deal about Mr Wieder, he thinks you know more” (*DS* 117).

⁹⁵ “Really... a dreadful business” (*DS* 149).

The action has moved from Chile to Europe, but it still has not escaped from the long shadow of Carlos Wieder. By helping Romero, the narrator enters the violent world of Wieder, which perhaps explains his recurring fear of an essential likeness between the two of them. When he begins to investigate for Romero, the narrator has a dream in which he finds himself at a party on a yacht, with Carlos Wieder in attendance. The boat begins to sink, and the narrator writes, “comprendía en ese momento, mientras las olas nos alejaban, que Wieder y yo habíamos viajado en el *mismo* barco, sólo que él había contribuido a hundirlo y yo había hecho poco o nada por evitarlo” (ED 131).⁹⁶ This dream dramatizes the narrator’s anxieties about any potential point of comparison between Wieder and himself. His fear surfaces again when he finally sees Wieder in Blanes—he feels a vertiginous sensation, and “por un instante (en el que me sentí desfallecer) me vi a mí mismo casi pegado a él, mirando por encima de su hombro, horrendo hermano siamés” (ED 144).⁹⁷ Bibiano’s quietism, his failure to directly confront the legacy of Wieder, troubles the narrator, but he is equally disturbed by his own potential for violent action.

These preoccupations frame the narrator’s decrease in poetic production. Faced by his own resemblance to Wieder, and by Wieder’s monstrous but perfect fusion of poetry with politics, the narrator abandons literature. Describing the moment after he has identified Wieder by his alter-ego Defoe, but before he has gone to Blanes, the narrator announces this abandonment, writing: “Ésta es mi última transmisión desde el planeta de los monstruos. No me sumergiré nunca más en el mar

⁹⁶ “Only then, as the waves pushed us apart, did I understand that Wieder and I had been travelling in the *same boat*; he may have conspired to sink it, but I had done little or nothing to stop it going down” (DS 122).

de mierda de la literatura. En adelante escribiré mis poemas con humildad y trabajaré para no morir de hambre y no intentaré publicar” (*ED* 138).⁹⁸ This assertion is somewhat ambiguous, with two equally revealing potential implications. In this instance, it is unclear exactly *when* the narrator is writing. If the reader assumes that the narrator writes as events unfold, then this statement, which occurs at the beginning of the penultimate chapter, refers to the narrator’s immersion in the writing of the “escritores bárbaros,” and not the murder of Carlos Wieder, which has not yet happened. In this instance, it would be his disgust at the writing of various fascist poets, exemplified by Carlos Wieder, that compels him to stop writing. If, on the other hand, the entire narrative is written after the end of the novel, then this statement is surely colored by the narrator’s distaste for his own complicity in Wieder’s murder.

These two interpretations are far from mutually exclusive; in fact, the narrator’s fear that he is somehow linked to Carlos Wieder suggests that they are essentially functions of the same preoccupation. The narrator’s mounting disgust at the magazines he reads for Romero is based upon their unsettling blend of fascist or extreme right-wing politics with the concerns of high art. Wieder seamlessly unites literature with violence. Having been implicated in violence, the narrator would risk an even greater resemblance to Wieder if he tried to represent it through literature. It is for this reason that he does not stop writing entirely, just publishing. By refusing to

⁹⁷ “For a nauseating moment I could see myself almost joined to him, like a vile Siamese twin, looking over his shoulder” (*DS* 144).

⁹⁸ “This is my last communiqué from the planet of the monsters. Never again will I immerse myself in literature’s bottomless cesspools. I will go back to writing my poems, such as they are, find a job to keep body and soul together, and make no attempt to get published” (*DS* 130).

publish, he removes his writing from the public sphere—his own artistic representations will not participate in the construction of public memory.

The narrator's statement of withdrawal from literature also highlights the curiously layered property of the novel. While *Estrella distante* is, on the most basic level, a work of fiction written by Roberto Bolaño, it presents itself as the factual testimony of its narrator. This objective character, however, is consistently called into question by the narrator's essential uncertainty over crucial plot developments, and the continual recourse to speculation and conjecture that ensues. Furthermore, by describing his narrative as his "última transmisión desde el planeta de los monstruos"—a territory he equates with "el mar de mierda de la literatura"—the narrator implies that it exists within the realm of literature, further complicating its function as testimony. *Estrella distante*, then, is a record of a history of political violence and it is a literary work—the prose narrative that is the last writing of a disaffected poet. This generic ambiguity in the form of the narrative is less a lack of resolution on part of the writer and more a necessary means of presenting the central concern of literature's intersection with and representation of politics.

The narrative's fragmentary quality, filled with gaps and uncertainty, is thus not just a matter of the limited amount of information available to the narrator—it is a function of his abhorrence of Wieder's totalitarian certainty. Wieder achieves an untroubled—but troubling—synthesis of avant-garde artistic values with the agenda of the Pinochet regime. His poems inscribe his own totalized vision of contemporary Chile in the sky, imposing it upon the public. The narrator's testimony, then, especially in light of his own involvement in Wieder's death, must deny this sort of authoritative presentation of history and politics, even as it incorporates them into

literature. *Estrella distante* avoids this kind of authoritative statement is by consistently calling its own testimony into question, and by avoiding publication altogether.

Estrella distante reconstructs history, and, by highlighting the ostensible witness' absence from the crucial events of his testimony, foregrounds the very fact that it is a reconstruction, with all the uncertainty that awareness entails. José de Piérola identifies *Estrella distante* as part of a trend of new historical novels in Spain and Spanish America, which break from their 19th Century predecessors by abandoning the pretense of representing history with any objectivity or completeness of scope. In these novels, as in *Estrella distante*, “lo que está en juego, no es tanto la presentación de versiones alternativas de la historia, tampoco el cuestionamiento de la verdad de la Historia, sino más bien el cuestionamiento de la historiografía en general.”⁹⁹ Although Chilean political history drives the majority of the plot of *Estrella distante*, the novel resists the creation of a broader narrative. The narrator exhibits a hesitancy to situate the events he describes in a more general framework, refusing to narrate the most monumental events in anything but a highly glancing fashion. Although his coup is the impetus for the nearly all of the novel's action, Pinochet is mentioned by name only twice, each time briefly, in passing (*ED* 81, 107). The narrator dispatches the coup itself in one terse sentence: “pocos días después llegó el golpe militar y la desbandada” (*ED* 26).¹⁰⁰ While Wieder frames his poetry

⁹⁹ José de Piérola, “El envés de la historia. (Re)construcción de la historia en *Estrella distante* de Roberto Bolaño y *Soldados de Salamina* de Javier Cercas,” pp. 245-246. “What is in play is not so much the presentation of alternative versions of history, nor even the questioning of the truth of History, so much as the questioning of historiography in general.”

¹⁰⁰ “A few days later the army seized power and the government collapsed” (*ED* 16).

with a grand narrative of death and rebirth, repurposing diverse cultural artifacts in the process, the narrator refuses, as a way of challenging Wieder's totalizing mission, to fully explicate even the basic political circumstances that are so important to his story.

This pattern is present in *Estrella distante* even at the fundamental level of the language and rhetoric it uses. Several critics have noted the novel's persistent use of speculation and digression as literary techniques. Ignacio Echevarría, among others, notes the novel's "característico estilo conjetural."¹⁰¹ An uncertainty enters the novel at exactly the point the narrator fixes as the origin of Carlos Wieder: the murder of the Garmendia sisters. Up to this point, the narrative has taken the form of personal recollection, with the narrator describing his own encounters with Wieder. When describing the death of the twins, however, he warns the reader that, "de aquí mi relato se nutrirá básicamente de conjeturas" (*ED* 29).¹⁰² After this moment, the bulk of the narrative will be composed of information that the narrator gleans from Bibiano or from Romero, not that he has witnessed himself. Furthermore, the narrator witnesses none of the murders that are central to the plot of the novel—he is present neither at the site of Wieder's crimes nor at Wieder's apartment when Romero murders him. The narrator creates a distance between himself and his story, and between his story and the factual history it attempts to represent. By establishing this distance, he can preclude in his work the totalizing synthesis of poetry, history, and politics that Wieder achieves.

¹⁰¹ Ignacio Echevarría, "Historia particular de una infamia," p. 38. "Characteristic conjectural style."

2666

Bolaño's final novel, *2666*, concerns itself with many of the same issues as *Estrella distante*, chief among them the possibility of representing horrific acts. Although the novel's narrative is sprawling and decentered, it could be said to have two primary objects of focus: the serial murders of women in the Mexican city of Santa Teresa, and the novels of the mysterious German writer Benno von Archimboldi. The novel is divided into five discrete chapters, or parts, which never quite cohere entirely. The murders and Archimboldi, however, form the clearest lines of continuity through a fragmentary, panoramic narrative. Neither of these narrative elements is entirely unique; rather, each one is exemplary of a broader preoccupation. In the first instance, the killings in Santa Teresa (themselves a barely fictionalized recounting of real-life events in Ciudad Juárez)¹⁰³ represent a preoccupation with violence and atrocities—a broad spectrum of phenomena that could be grouped under the category of “horror”¹⁰⁴—that recurs throughout *2666*. This obsession is evident in diverse forms throughout the novel, which at different points of the narrative touches upon madness, sexualized violence, and the Holocaust, among other topics. In the second instance, the writing of Archimboldi is merely the most prominent case in a

¹⁰² “From here on, my story is mainly conjecture” (*DS* 19).

¹⁰³ For a lucid and informative study of Bolaño's fascination with the murders in Ciudad Juárez, and their impact on *2666*, see Marcela Valdes's article “Alone Among the Ghosts: Roberto Bolaño's ‘2666’” published in *The Nation*.

¹⁰⁴ While many of the commentators on *2666* have used the word *mal*, or evil, to denote a similar range of phenomena, I have chosen the word *horror*, largely for two reasons. First, because it recalls the citation from Baudelaire that Bolaño uses as an epigram for the novel—“Un oasis de horror en medio de un desierto de aburrimiento” [“An oasis of horror in a desert of boredom”]. Second, because it implies that the contested territory has an aesthetic or sensory dimension, in contrast with the more purely moral overtones of the word evil. While the moral or ethical dimension of

narrative that is constituted to a disproportionate degree by the discussion of painters, writers, and filmmakers. Rather than forming a center or a core, these two elements could perhaps best be described as the poles between which the narrative of *2666* oscillates.

The bulk of the novel is concerned precisely with the interaction between art and horror, the degree to which one pole can neither exist independently from the other nor entirely integrate its counterpoint into itself. Alexis Candia, in his essay “*2666: la magia y el mal*,” writes of the opposition between what he calls *evil*, typified by “el frenesí sádico, lo siniestro o la violencia,” on the one hand, and what he, alluding to a dream sequence within the novel, calls *magic*, typified by “[el] erotismo y la épica,” on the other.¹⁰⁵ This formulation recognizes the two crucial preoccupations of the novel but, by putting them in opposition to each other, fails to acknowledge their tangled connections. As in *Estrella distante*, art’s relation to violence and atrocity is uneasy and complex. In *2666*, horror is something that art cannot ignore any more than it can properly represent it.

Prior to considering the modes of representing horror depicted in *2666*, it may be helpful to understand, insofar as it is possible, the nature of horror in the novel and the difficulties inherent in representing it. The murders in Santa Teresa are the primary expression of this horror throughout the novel, but they are repeatedly framed as a part of a much broader continuity of atrocities. Albert Kessler, a famous American detective who is brought to Santa Teresa to try to solve the crimes, ties the

2666 is undeniable, the more aesthetic connotations of the word horror seem a better fit for an essay primarily focused on issues of representation.

¹⁰⁵ Alexis Candia, “*2666: la magia y el mal*,” p. 121.

“Forces such as the sadistic frenzy, the sinister, or violence... eroticism and epic.”

killings into a history of violence against marginal members of society. Kessler cites Jack the Ripper, the slave trade, and the violence of the Paris Commune, noting that,

“los muertos de la Comuna no pertenecían a la sociedad, la gente de color muerta en el barco no pertenecían a la sociedad, mientras que la mujer muerta en una capital de provincia francesa y el asesino a caballo de Virginia sí pertenecían, es decir, lo que a ellos les sucediera era escribible, era legible” (2666 338-339).¹⁰⁶

Kessler posits a pattern in which vast crimes perpetrated in liminal spaces—against, he notes, people who cannot be represented in polite society—fail to attract the attention that crimes of a much smaller scope occurring within certain boundaries inevitably arouse. This paradigm corresponds to the situation in Santa Teresa, in which the victims are mostly impoverished transient workers at local *maquiladoras*, or import factories, and the crimes have persisted for years without any forceful response from the government or the police. Describing the population from which most of the victims come, Kessler remarks that “esa sociedad está fuera de la sociedad, todos, absolutamente todos son como los antiguos cristianos en el circo” (2666 339).¹⁰⁷ This line of thought illuminates the importance of Santa Teresa—it provides a context within which the phenomenon can be understood, and it demonstrates the extent to which the murders, by virtue of the disproportionately

¹⁰⁶ Roberto Bolaño, 2666, pp. 338-339. Hereafter cited parenthetically (2666). “The ones killed in the Commune weren’t part of society, the dark-skinned people who died on the ship weren’t part of society, whereas the woman killed in a French provincial capital and the murderer on horseback in Virginia were. What happened to them could be written, you might say, it was legible” Roberto Bolaño, 2666, Trans. Natasha Wimmer, pp. 266-267. Hereafter cited (Wimmer).

¹⁰⁷ “Everyone living in that city is outside of society, and everyone, I mean everyone, is like the ancient Christians in the Roman circus” (Wimmer 267).

large marginal population they affect, are exceptional within the paradigm to which they belong.

This context, however, is perhaps the only one in which the murders in Santa Teresa can be understood in any way. After the horror and depravity that primarily characterizes them, they are most notable precisely for their capacity to elude interpretation, and thus resist any representation. At its most superficial level, this capacity is apparent in the failed efforts of policemen and detectives to discern the basic facts of the crimes. The claim that there is a single killer responsible for all the crimes loses credibility once the supposed murderer is jailed and the killings continue in his absence. Shortly afterwards, Albert Kessler is brought to Santa Teresa, but even the master detective cannot help (2666 719, 741).¹⁰⁸ Later on, Kessler will state that “los crímenes tienen firmas diferentes” (2666 339),¹⁰⁹ implying that the crimes cannot be explained by any simple, singular interpretation. Rather, there is a wide variety of factors that create the situation in Santa Teresa. In a curious way, Santa Teresa comes to resemble the Library of Babel; as in Borges’s stories, the surplus of data confounds the possibilities of knowledge. As the number of crimes increases seemingly without limit—a situation which implies an expanding network of guilt as well—it becomes harder and harder to establish the conjectures, patterns, and trends that constitute interpretation. The diffusion and the extension of the crimes, the impossibility of finding a pattern in the large set of data they create, frustrate any efforts towards a useful analysis of the murders. Santa Teresa is troubling on several

¹⁰⁸ The figure of Kessler, it should be noted, is based upon the real-life detective Robert Ressler, an expert on serial killers. Ressler visited Ciudad Juárez, the site of the killings that inspired *2666*, and was similarly unsuccessful. Natasha Wimmer, “Notes Toward an Annotated Edition of *2666*.”

hermeneutic levels, the first of which is that of detective work, of the attempt to understand the factual contours of the case.

These basic factual troubles result in an equivalent difficulty in creating an intellectual or literary representation of the crimes. While they remain unsolved, the crimes are limitless. Without closure or clearly defined boundaries, the crimes resist representation in a finite form, whether it be deductive or literary. Bolaño's strategy of narrating in a detached tone the circumstances of every murder of a woman in Santa Teresa would seem to inject a measure of objectivity into the narrative, to circumscribe the range of the crimes within certain limits. But as with *Estrella distante*, Bolaño introduces uncertainty into the moments where his narrative ought to be most factual. Bolaño's narrator begins his account of the crimes with the first dead woman found in 1993, setting up a temporal limit that he immediately calls into question. "Es probable," he writes of Esperanza Gómez Saldaña, "que no fuera la primera muerta" (2666 444).¹¹⁰ He has selected her death as the beginning, "tal vez por comodidad... aunque seguramente en 1992 murieron otras" (2666 444).¹¹¹ The parameters of the killings, then, are highly ambiguous. Just as no-one can forecast when they will end, no-one is able to tell exactly when they began either.

Furthermore, as the narrative progresses, the boundaries that separate the serial killings from other, more routine violence become increasingly porous. Bolaño lists each woman who is found murdered in Santa Teresa within the time frame of the novel, including, for instance, a dancer who is murdered at work by her husband

¹⁰⁹ "The crimes have different signatures" (Wimmer 267).

¹¹⁰ "It's likely there had been other deaths before" (Wimmer 353).

¹¹¹ "Maybe for the sake of convenience... although surely there were other girls and women who died in 1992" (Wimmer 353).

(2666 636). This killing, however horrific it may be, seems to be unrelated to the more mysterious serial killings that occupy most of the space of the narrative. By including these murders that have little in common with the general pattern—or, more precisely, any of the various patterns—established by the majority of the crimes, Bolaño suggests that what is occurring in Santa Teresa is not a discrete series of murders by one or even several criminals, but a broader, more troubling spectrum of behavior that occurs in various degrees across an entire city. Whatever the ethical or theoretical merits such an approach, which locates complicity with the murders in diverse actions and levels of society, it restricts the possibilities of constructing a single narrative of a highly complex set of circumstances.

The crimes of Santa Teresa are difficult to comprehend for reasons that recall both Borges's critique of total knowledge in the face of surplus and *Estrella distante's* fracturing of the construction of history. But there is also a visceral, or even sensory, basis for the difficulty of representing the crimes. By their violence and extremity, the killings resist the steady, focused contemplation that informs a faithful representation. Furthermore, the intellectual impossibility of comprehending the crimes augments the visceral horror they inspire. The difficulty in establishing the exact boundaries of the crimes implies that they have limitless reach, an even more terrifying prospect than a discrete, limited series of murders. Thus Kessler's notion of "illegibility" extends past the social context of the murders into their very ontology. The various representations in *2666* of the crimes themselves or of the broader pattern of horror of which they are a part must be evaluated on the way they negotiate this notion of illegibility. To create a representation of these events that clarifies their essential vagueness would be to dismiss one of their fundamental characteristics. On

the other hand, an illegible representation, one that recreates the uncertainty of its object, risks failure in its capacity to represent at all.

The story of Edwin Johns, interpolated into the first part of the novel, addresses precisely these issues. The character is a British painter, and he plays a role in the narrative trajectory of *2666* that is marginal at best. Johns himself appears only once in the novel; this appearance is bookended by two conversations between Liz Norton and Piero Morini, literary critics. In the first conversation, Norton narrates an account of his first major gallery show and his subsequent insanity and retirement. Later on, Morini visits Johns in his convalescent home outside of Montreux. Finally, Norton and Morini discuss the artist's death after he falls into a ravine in the forest in Switzerland. Outside of the first part of the novel, Johns is not mentioned again. Furthermore, Johns's work has no direct connection to the murders in Santa Teresa that will increasingly become a focal point of the novel as it progresses; indeed, there is no indication whatsoever that Johns is even aware of the killings. Instead, his art seems to be informed by some sort of private horror, a minor iteration of the pattern of horror exemplified in Santa Teresa. The figure of Edwin Johns, despite his lack of importance to the plot of the novel, serves as a keynote to a theme that resounds throughout the rest of *2666*. The discussion of Johns's life and work provides an early, forceful examination of art's capacity to represent horror.

A settling in a post-industrial neighborhood in London and painting fervently for a year, Edwin Johns inaugurates in his first gallery show a school of painting known as "*nuevo decadentismo o animalismo inglés*" (2666 76).¹¹² In his year of preparing these paintings, Johns immerses himself in his neighborhood; it becomes a

crucial part of his life and his work. Despite the neighborhood's squalor, Johns is not bothered: "no lo asustó, al contrario, se enamoró de él" (2666 76).¹¹³ His locale motivates Johns—"aguijoneó la imaginación y las ganas de trabajar del pintor" (2666 75).¹¹⁴ It is fitting, then, that the bulk of the works in the show Johns puts on are "cuadros... de tres metros por dos, y mostraban, entre una amalgama de grises, los restos del naufragio de su barrio" (2666 76).¹¹⁵ Crucially, the effect of these paintings suggests that "entre el pintor y el barrio se hubiera producido una simbiosis total. Es decir que a veces parecía que el pintor pintaba el barrio y otras que el barrio pintaba al pintor con sus lúgubres trazos salvajes" (2666 76).¹¹⁶ Painter and neighborhood come together in the ambiguous authorship of these paintings. Johns has in some way come to embody his surroundings, lending a particular authoritative weight to his painterly representation of those surroundings. Already, then, Johns's work has begun to create a system of equivalencies between the painter, his subject, and the representation.

These paintings, however, pale both in impact and in representational force when compared to the central painting of the show, which one character will later call, "el autorretrato más radical de los últimos años" (2666 77).¹¹⁷ This painting, smaller than the others, is,

"bien mirado (aunque nadie podía estar seguro de mirarlo bien), un elipsis de autorretratos, en ocasiones una espiral de autorretratos

¹¹² "New decadence or English animalism" (Wimmer 52).

¹¹³ "[It] didn't frighten him. He fell in love with it, actually" (Wimmer 52).

¹¹⁴ "This sparked the painter's imagination and inspired him to work" (Wimmer 52).

¹¹⁵ "The paintings... were big, ten feet by seven, and they portrayed the remains of the shipwreck of his neighborhood, awash in a mingling of grays" (Wimmer 52).

¹¹⁶ "Painter and neighborhood had achieved total symbiosis. As if, in other words, the painter were painting the neighborhood or the neighborhood were painting the painter, in savage, gloomy strokes" (Wimmer 52).

¹¹⁷ "The most radical self-portrait of our time" (Wimmer 53).

(depende del lugar desde donde fuera contemplado), en cuyo centro, momificada, pendía la mano derecha del pintor” (2666 76).¹¹⁸

In Johns’s other paintings, the coincidence between artistic representation and its object is rhetorical, a matter of metaphor. In the self-portrait, however, this coincidence is literal; here Johns’s actual hand, preserved by a taxidermist, is physically embedded in the painting. Where the other paintings blurred the distinction between the artist and his environment, this portrait completely elides the distinctions between the artist and his art or the art and its subject, which, in this case, is the artist himself.

The fascination that Johns’s portrait exerts upon Piero Morini, and upon the new decadent painters who presumably follow its lead in some way, must be due in large part to its extremity and to its disarming literalness. That is to say that the self-portrait is singular for two related reasons. On the one hand, it has a strong, unavoidable association with violence and suffering. On the other hand, it is able to stake a claim to authenticity, to “realness,” that traditional painting cannot; in the sense that the central object of the painting is in fact the physical hand of the painter, it avoids mimesis altogether. It is both a representation that is both legible and exact. These two features have a common effect—they distinguish the painting—and each is made possible by Johns’s horrific act of self-mutiliation. But despite their common origin, the self-portrait’s fidelity to reality and the pervasive horror that it conjures exist entirely separately from each other. If Morini and Norton, or Bolaño’s readers

¹¹⁸ “Viewed properly (although one could never be sure of viewing it properly)... an ellipsis of self-portraits, sometimes a spiral of self-portraits (depending on the angle from which it was seen),... in the center of which hung the painter’s mummified right hand” (Wimmer 53).

for that matter, believe Johns's self-portrait to bring the horror it purports to depict outside of the realm of representation and into the realm of the actual, then the painting cannot possibly deliver what they expect it to.

Johns's self-portrait, to be sure, strongly evokes horror, but it evokes this horror entirely through a more conventional system of representation, rather than the radical, violent means through which Johns incorporates his hand into the painting. The associations with Johns and his portrait that Bolaño enumerates heighten this sensation. It is clear that Johns has been confronted with some sort of horror, although its origins and specific characteristics are vague. While he prepares his earliest paintings, Johns is haunted by "la conciencia de que esta ecuación era posible: dolor que finalmente deviene vacío. La conciencia de que esta ecuación era aplicable a todo o casi todo" (2666 76).¹¹⁹ After his portrait is exhibited, of course, Johns goes insane (although in what respect one who has already cut off his hand to include it in a painting can *become* insane is never specified). Later still, he dies in a horrific accident, falling to the bottom of a ravine outside of his sanatorium. This history of suffering, exemplified by Johns's actual act of self-mutilation, envelops the portrait, cannot help but condition its viewer's response. The temptation, then, is to invest Johns's disembodied hand, hanging from the center of his painting, with the weight of this history. Even if we accept this interpretation, however, the physical hand would become a mere representation in relation to the substance it must convey. Johns's severed hand represents his personal catalogue of suffering in the same way

¹¹⁹ "The knowledge that this [equation] was possible: pain that turns finally into emptiness. The knowledge that the same equation applied to everything, more or less" (Wimmer 52). Wimmer translates the first *ecuación* as *question*, perhaps to

that a drawing of a hand represents a bodily hand. However effectively Johns's painting represents the vague horror he has apprehended, it does not—cannot—confront its viewers with its visceral, actual presence in the same way that it confronts its audience with the painter's hand. Johns's self-portrait can overcome representation, and it can represent Johns's personal horror, but it cannot do both at once.

The act of representation most crucial to the novel, the one that implicitly provides a point of reference for all the others, is Bolaño's own representation of the crimes in Santa Teresa. These crimes elude representation because of the twin challenges they pose to interpretation and contemplation. Rather than try to overcome these limitations through heightened methods of representation, Bolaño exploits them, rupturing the narrative form of *2666* as a way of conveying a measure of the incomprehension the crimes engender. This rupture is both intrinsic and extrinsic to the representation of the killings within the novel. On the extrinsic level, the placement of the details of Santa Teresa throughout the entirety of the novel frustrates the reader's desire to understand the crimes. On the intrinsic level, Bolaño exploits a stunning array of stylistic techniques to convey the visceral difficulty in perceiving the crimes at all.

The fragmentary nature of *2666* frustrates the reader's desire for narrative clarity, for a story with a beginning, a middle, and an end, or a conflict and a resolution. The five-part structure of *2666*¹²⁰ is instrumental to this technique,

avoid redundancy; I have attempted to stick a little closer to a precise, literal translation.

¹²⁰ In a note that appears before the beginning of the novel proper, Bolaño's heirs acknowledge that in his will the author had specified that *2666* should be published as

allowing Bolaño to approach the crimes from a distance, several times, before finally making them the primary focus of the narrative and examining them in great detail in the fourth part, “La parte de los crímenes.” Each part of the novel eventually arrives in Santa Teresa, but none of the major characters of the other parts can be found in the fourth. This narrative multiplicity, the implication that Santa Teresa is generating unlimited, divergent stories, undercuts any attempt to read “La parte de los crímenes” as a definitive encapsulation of Santa Teresa.

The fourth part of the novel is clearly the most developed, in depth treatment of the matter, but it is colored and recontextualized by the other four parts of the book, each of which touches in some distinct way upon the killings. While “La parte de los crímenes” creates a broad, panoramic portrait of Santa Teresa, it largely remains confined within the city. The other parts function in relation to this highly detailed portrait as select visions of the world outside of Santa Teresa. Notably, the protagonists of each other part of the novel come from outside of Mexico altogether. Each part, other than “La parte de los crímenes,” tells the story of an arrival in Santa Teresa, implying both a world outside of the city, and a sense of the city as an iteration of certain broader patterns. For instance, the first part, “La parte de los críticos” in several instances illustrates violence and horror intruding upon the world of the titular critics, a European, academic world that on the surface is far removed from Santa Teresa. These outbreaks—including, most prominently, a scene in which a Spanish and a French literary critic beat a Pakistani taxi driver in London nearly to

five separate books in order to increase sales and better provide for his children. While his children and his executor agreed to publish the novel in one volume, these instructions indicate the relative autonomy of each part within the overarching structure of the novel (2666 11).

death (2666 108)—serve as notice that the horror found in Santa Teresa is not confined there. This wider purview necessarily limits the totalizing force of “La parte de los crímenes.” If the horror of Santa Teresa extends outside of the city—and thus the scope of the fourth part—then “La parte de los crímenes” cannot be understood as a definitive, complete representation.

Further subverting the potential for a total interpretation is the irreducible discontinuity between the several narratives that make up *2666*. The figure of Benno von Archimboldi is a crucial point of contact between the various parts of the novel. His mysterious absence is the motivator for the first part of the book, the plot of which largely consists of critics searching for the Archimboldi, first in his novels, and later, when they hear reports of him in Northern Mexico, in Santa Teresa. Klaus Haas, the German immigrant accused of being the man behind the killings in Santa Teresa, is eventually revealed to be Archimboldi’s nephew. It seems to be to Archimboldi that Haas refers when, from his prison cell, he speaks to another prisoner of “un gigante... un hombre muy grande, muy grande [que] te va a matar a ti y a todos” (2666 603).¹²¹ That the fifth and final part of the novel is named “La parte de Archimboldi” implies a resolution, or at least an intersection between these several parts, but the end of the novel raises more questions than it answers. While Bolaño does answer the question of what brings Archimboldi to Mexico, he does not specify what he actually does in Santa Teresa. The novel ends immediately before Archimboldi arrives—the last sentence reveals that “la mañana siguiente se marchó a

¹²¹ “A giant... a big man, very big [who is] going to kill you and everybody else” (Wimmer 481).

México” (2666 1119).¹²² The narrative construction of 2666 is fragmentary, if not to the same degree, then in the same way, as the evidence left by the killings in Santa Teresa. The reader’s frustrated desire to construct a single narrative that can encapsulate 2666 mimics the detective’s frustrated desire to solve the illegible crimes.

Within “La parte de los crímenes” itself, Bolaño exploits a drastic stylistic shift to convey the difficulty in contemplating the crimes, a difficulty even more fundamental than the difficulty of interpreting them. The most immediately striking feature of “La parte de los crímenes” is the frequent interpolation of spare descriptions of the discovery of each murdered woman into the rest of the narrative. These brief accounts plainly enumerate the known details of each murder: the name of the victim, the way in which she was killed, the place the body was found, and little else. A characteristic example reads as follows:

“Dos días después de aparecer el cuerpo de la primera víctima de agosto fue encontrado el cuerpo de Emilia Escalante Sanjuán, de treintatrés años, con profusión de hematomas en el tórax y el cuello. El cadáver se halló en el cruce entre Michoacán y General Saavedra, en la colonia Trabajadores. El informe del forense dictamina que la causa de la muerte es estrangulamiento, después e haber sido violada innumerables veces” (2666 576).¹²³

Read individually, outside of the rest of the novel, any one of these interludes might seem to create a perfect facsimile of the crimes, faithfully reproducing the known

¹²² “The next morning he was on his way to Mexico” (Wimmer 893).

¹²³ “Two days after the appearance of the first August victim, the body of Emilia Escalante Sanjuán was found, presenting multiple hematomas over the chest and neck. The body was discovered at the intersection of Michoacán and General Saavedra, in Colonia Trabajadores. The medical examiner’s report stated that the cause of death was strangulation, after the victim had been raped countless times” (Wimmer 460).

details without attempting an impossible extrapolation. Following this line of thought, the interludes' function within the novel would be analogous to the function of Edwin Johns' hand in his self-portrait, as a direct embodiment of suffering and horror.

Read in the context of the novel, however, these interludes seem to function differently, not as legible representations at all. From within the entirety of *2666*, the journalistic or even forensic style in which they are written does not so much suggest objectivity as a fundamental incapacity of literary representation. The stylistic discontinuity is a function of the killings' illegibility. They are too horrific to be assimilated into literature, so they remain as heterogeneous elements unincorporated into the narrative of *2666*. Furthermore, the cumulative effect of these frequent interruptions is not to allow the reader a more full perception of the killings. Instead, as in Borges, surplus overwhelms the senses. The actual substance of the interludes—the specific details of each killing—is of no import to the plot. Their function within the novel is not to convey information but rather to produce an effect of exhaustion within the reader. As “La parte de los crímenes” progresses, they become less and less legible, more indistinguishable from the past variations in the seemingly endless series. Bolaño cannot represent any conjectural significance of the crimes, but he can reproduce the conditions that trouble their representation.

In both *Estrella distante* and *2666*, Bolaño refuses to incarnate the horror that is his subject within the texts he writes. Rather than try to overcome the difficulty of representation, to go beyond the ordinary rigor of fiction writing and somehow create the definitive horrific landscape, he chooses to represent that difficulty itself. This

decision functions both as an admission of his own limits and a denial of the type of thinking embodied by Carlos Wieder. By fracturing representation, what Bolaño manages to show is not the actual substance of the horror itself that fascinates him, but rather the stunned incomprehension it induces. He cannot depict the heart of the abyss itself, but he can convey the sensation of freefall that precedes it.

Conclusion

In this project, I have tried both to outline the contours of Borges's and Bolaño's diverse methodologies, and, in looking towards the principle that animates their use of these techniques, to show a point of convergence, a purpose common to both authors. Each author begins, in a sense, with the notion that art or literature can offer a faithful or accurate representation of an external reality. Borges troubles this idea by pushing it to its epistemological limits, demonstrating the ways that such representations, literary or otherwise, ultimately fail or become useless as representations when their scope and complexity increase past a certain point. Stories such as "La Biblioteca de Babel" and "Funes el memorioso" illustrate the way that these troubles arise with a surplus of data. In Bolaño's novels, on the other hand, the problem is more a function of a violent, atrocious reality that is so horrific that it cannot be faithfully represented except in the form of further violence. In these novels there is a sensory basis for the problems of representation as much as an intellectual one. This shared skepticism towards the possibility of a complete literary representation contextualizes each author's decision to write primarily about literature itself as a means of avoiding the above dilemmas. Borges and Bolaño write about literature of such totalizing ambitions as a means of positioning their own writing

against it. Each one—by methods tailored to their own particular critique of faithful representation—subverts and prevails over the fictional writers around whom they center their own fiction.

The stories of Borges articulate this metaliterary preoccupation by various methods; among the most notable is the criticism of fictional literary texts. The books, poems, and other literary projects about which Borges writes are notable for their ambition in going beyond normal literary methods of representation. Each one aims to move past the traditional limits of literary scope, the necessary ambiguities of artistic representation. Borges subverts these goals by two means: first by showing that such accurate representations cannot give their audience what they promise, and second by advancing his own, highly distinct conception of literature. Borges's stories counteract the project of total understanding or comprehension by opposing their own self-consciously minor form to the expansive form of the texts they discuss. Thus Ireneo Funes's limitless, disorganized memories are contained within the form of a biographical sketch, Carlos Argentino Daneri's epic poem is contained within a short story, and Pierre Menard's great invisible novel is contained within a book review. By opposing the tautological, tedious character of these attempted masterworks to the concision and the conceptual fluidity of the critical writing he uses to surround them, Borges develops the basis for his own way of understanding literature.

For Borges, literature, and intellectual activity in general, is not founded in existing positivities but rather in the negative spaces left by imperfect knowledge and perception. Borges understands the contingencies of representation not as a flaw to be smoothed over but rather as the elements that make representation useful at all.

Borges's positioning of his fiction as criticism, then, is fitting for a number of reasons. For one, it provides a legible example of a more abstract relationship: the review of a nonexistent book is the perfect place to develop a theory of representation as the recreation of a loss or an absence. Furthermore, the form of the fake review allows Borges a degree of subtlety that is absolutely necessary to his literary project. Were he to express his ideas directly or polemically, Borges would risk creating the same kind of totalized, dogmatic system he opposes. To write a comprehensive attack on literary ambition is, in a way, to succumb to literary ambition. To write glosses and commentaries, on the other hand, allows Borges to put forth his ideas with a necessary modesty.

Bolaño's novels refer to numerous fictional literary texts as well, although they focus less on pronouncing criticism of the intrinsic character of these writings than understanding their relation to a broader literary community—a poetry workshop, for example, or a group of critics. The fictional texts Bolaño writes of are no less ambitious in their representative power than those found in Borges, and they are of an almost totemic importance to both their supporters and detractors within Bolaño's fiction. Figures like Carlos Wieder and Edwin Johns loom large over the creative efforts of Bolaño's protagonists, serving as a reminder that a true representation of a horrific reality must necessarily reproduce that very horror. Like Borges, Bolaño subtly positions his own writing against the fictional works he interpolates into his novels, albeit through different methods.

While Borges wrote only short fiction—a crucial way for him to oppose the ambition of the masterwork to the secondary character of criticism—Bolaño wrote novels, some of them quite long, as a way of dismantling the logic of the total novel

from within. Under this maneuver, Bolaño operates on the level of style and texture rather than form and genre. A book like *Estrella distante*, despite its relatively short length, is composed of a highly digressive narrative that lacks the intensity and unity of affect more common to a short story or novella. *Estrella distante* takes on some of the scope of Carlos Wieder's project, but, like Borges before the *Aleph*, it constantly backs away, calling attention to its own elisions and its ultimate refusal to put its fragmentary pieces together. *2666* takes this refusal even further, developing an array of techniques that frustrate and impede the progression of a coherent narrative. The multiple plot lines—both the five parts of the novel and the variety of discrete anecdotes that make up each individual part—never line up, and the book ends precisely at the moment that they seem about to converge. Furthermore, Bolaño augments this frustration with the exhaustive size and seemingly arbitrary enumeration of details that characterize the novel. While Borges uses brevity as a contrast to epistemological tedium, Bolaño uses length and repetition, stretching literature out rather than turning it in on itself like Borges does, to convey a visceral, sensory impression of the horror of total representation.

What is at stake in these questions is an understanding of the place of literature itself, of its conventions, uses, and forms. The form of literature both Borges and Bolaño promote through their own writing is not a reflection of external reality but rather of the world of ideas, of representations themselves. This focus may leave these writers open to accusations of ignoring the so-called real world, of treating literature as a purely aesthetic proposition, an inconsequential game. Either author could defend themselves against such charges, though, by the very intellectual rigor of their critical thought. Both writers are concerned foremost with creating a literature

that explores the tangled relationship between ideas and the material world, and if the balance of their attention falls upon the former term, it is merely a matter of like expressing like. In their own writings, Borges and Bolaño have too much respect for the complexity and magnitude of the world to submit it to a totalized representation.

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