

Distant Star: Roberto Bolaño on Aesthetics, Fascism, and Judgment

After a decade or more in which much of Latin America had been governed by anti-democratic, authoritarian, and even genocidal regimes, from the mid-1980s the region experienced a widespread if gradual transition to democracy. The wave of democratization stretched from Argentina, whose dictatorship collapsed in 1983, to Chile, where General Augusto Pinochet, who had come to power via a coup seventeen years earlier, stepped down in 1990, and then to the Central American peace accords in Nicaragua (in 1990), El Salvador (in 1992), and Guatemala (in 1996). By the turn of the millennium, then, Latin America had been transformed, as almost the entirety of its population now officially enjoyed democratic and human rights, freedoms of expression and association, that had long been denied them. Much had changed, yet much also stayed the same. The region was still plagued with the inequalities and historic injustices that had led to social conflict in the first place. One of the first tasks of the new, nascent democracies was to account for the recent past in a bid to understand the sources of the bloodshed, hopefully to prevent its future re-emergence. This task was made harder by the fact that, under the dictatorships and civil wars, much of the violence had been clandestine or extra-judicial (death squads and disappearances) and subject to official cover-ups and denials, in a context of widespread ideological disinformation, sometimes from both sides. Simply establishing the facts of who had done what was far from straightforward. Hence a series of truth commissions were launched, some sponsored by the state and others by entities such as the Catholic church, to document what had happened, to apportion responsibility for the worst of the atrocities, and to pave the way for justice and/or reconciliation. Some of these processes led to prosecutions. Elsewhere, various forms of amnesty were proclaimed, limiting who could be prosecuted. Investigations and judicial claims for recognition or recompense continue to this day.

Roberto Bolaño's *Distant Star* (*Estrella distante*, 1996) charts the activities of one (fictional) perpetrator of state-licensed murder during the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile, and then the subsequent attempts to track him down and bring him to some kind of justice. Yet the book expresses ambivalence about the way in which, in lieu of official inquiry and prosecution, private initiatives take matters into their own hands. Above all, it also questions the role of literature and art: both their potential complicity with the violence

itself, and their role in the struggle for memory, justice, and reconciliation thereafter. In Bolaño's hands, literature can never forget that it is first and foremost an index of barbarism, and only secondarily (if at all) any kind of recompense or restitution.

1. *Art and Atrocity*

The German Marxist cultural theorist Theodor Adorno, lamenting the fate of serious discussion of serious things—"even the most extreme consciousness of doom threatens to degenerate into idle chatter," he claimed—once declared that "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric." In the wake of genocide, culture could not simply continue as though nothing had happened. Yet both cultural production and "cultural criticism" were in danger of being absorbed into what Adorno called the "culture industry," for which they would become simply products to be bought and sold like everything else. "Critical intelligence," Adorno concludes, "cannot be equal to this challenge as long as it confines itself to self-satisfied contemplation" (*Prisms* 34). Adorno was writing in the late 1940s, but surely the problem to which he points has become more critical in the intervening years, not least in our current "post-truth" epoch, for which everyone's opinions are only ever relative, a function of the media bubble they happen to inhabit.

Adorno later softened somewhat his position on whether culture could continue after an event such as the Holocaust—"it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz you could no longer write poems," in that "perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream"—though he maintained that "Auschwitz demonstrated irrefutably that culture has failed" and "All post-Auschwitz culture, including its urgent critique, is garbage" (*Negative Dialectics* 362, 366, 367). But his observation on the intertwining of culture and barbarism is if anything radicalized further by his one-time friend and correspondent, Walter Benjamin, who claims in his "Theses on the Philosophy of History" that "There is no document of civilization that is not at the same time a document of barbarism. [. . .] A historical materialist therefore disassociates himself from it as far as possible. He regards it as his task to brush history against the grain." It is not just post-Auschwitz that culture and barbarism can no longer be disentangled. This is simply a law of history in which, after any conflict, "whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which the present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate" (*Illuminations* 248). Even when history's victors present themselves as liberal and democratic, as in the case of Latin

America after the dictatorships, the culture they champion should on principle be subject to suspicion.

Roberto Bolaño's suspicion lands first on the avant-garde. *Distant Star* opens with a description of poetry workshops in Chile before the Pinochet coup, with democratically-elected left-wing President Salvador Allende still in power. The (un-named) narrator is a member of one of these workshops, and describes himself and his fellow poets as occupying the most radical positions within the Allende coalition: "mostly members or sympathisers of the MIR [the far-left *Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria* or "Revolutionary Left Movement"] or Trotskyite parties, although a few of us belonged to the Young Socialists or the Communist Party or one of the leftist Catholic parties" (6). They talk of "politics, travel [. . .] revolution and the armed struggle that would usher in a new life and a new era, so we thought" (3). One day, someone new turns up at the workshop, someone who does not seem quite to fit this template: calling himself Alberto Ruiz-Tagle, he is well-dressed and not a student; he lives on his own and is "never short of money" (6). Most of the other poets, though admiring and even jealous of his trappings of independence and material success (the men among them also resentful of the attention he draws from the women), look down on Ruiz-Tagle's poetry, declaring that there is "something distant and cold about his writing" (11). But one of them, the one who knows him best, declares that "Alberto [. . .] is going to revolutionize Chilean poetry" (14). The socialist poets, who think the future is theirs, will be forgotten. The real path-breaker, avant-garde shock troop of new forms of expression, will be this newcomer who will turn out to have the courage of his convictions, and then some.

The poetry that Ruiz-Tagle, revealed as or re-christened Carlos Wieder, comes to write is a complement to his role, post-coup, as a pilot in Pinochet's air force. The book's narrator sees Wieder's "first poetic act" (24) from a transit camp, as he has been taken prisoner by the new regime. Above him, an aeroplane appears, at first seemingly "moving as slowly as the clouds. [. . .] There, high above the city, it began to write a poem in the sky. [. . .] the letters appeared, as if the sky itself had secreted them. Perfectly formed letters of grey-black smoke on the sky's enormous screen of rose-tinged blue, chilling the eyes of those who saw them." The poem is in Latin, a transcription of the Vulgate Bible's opening lines from Genesis: "IN PRINCIPIO . . . CREAVIT DEUS . . . CAELUM ET TERRAM" (25); "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." Wieder continues with the next

few verses: “Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness” (Genesis 1:3-4). As the sky darkens, and as the political prisoners stare upwards, hanging on every letter, the plane returns one more time, its “symmetrical outline” looking “like a Rorschach blot,” to write one last word on the firmament: “LEARN” (29). This is a didactic text for a new era, a new creation *ab nihilo* as Allende’s defeated supporters are put to the sword—quite literally in the case of two of the former poetry workshop members, the Garmendia sisters, whom Carlos Wieder himself has already murdered, as part of a clandestine death squad.



Sky-writing

In subsequent months, Wieder continues with his sky-writing, increasingly in demand among the elite of the new right-wing government, putting on patriotic shows for “high-ranking officers and businessmen”: he outlines “a star, the star of our flag, sparkling and solitary over the implacable horizon” (31). He flies to Antarctica, where “in the crystal clear sky” he writes out “ANTARCTICA IS CHILE” (45). But it is with his final

performance, in 1974, a double-header that combines sky-writing with a photography exhibition firmly on the ground, that Wieder's avant-garde claims reach their apex. Here he sets out "to undertake something grand in the capital, something spectacular to show the world that the new regime and avant-garde art were not at odds, quite the contrary" (77). First, on a cloudy, blustery day that ensures that his sky-written words are more precarious and ephemeral than ever, he inscribes in the heavens a series of phrases about death: "*Death is friendship. [. . .] Death is Chile. [. . .] Death is responsibility. [. . .] Death is love and Death is growth. [. . .] Death is communion. [. . .] Death is cleansing. [. . .] Death is my heart*" (80, 81, 82). Though by this point his audience has dwindled to almost nothing in the rain below, he then adds "*Take my heart*" and his name, "*Carlos Wieder,*" before a final *aperçu*, unseen by almost anyone: "*Death is resurrection*" (82). The poem suggests a necropolitics, or a political philosophy that puts death at its centre, exalting annihilation as the premise for national identity and community. Chile will be a country founded on extermination. Culture and barbarism will unapologetically coexist.

2. *Fascism's Contradictions*

The second part of Wieder's *magnum opus* is a photography exhibition that same day, in a small flat in an upscale Santiago suburb. Though the novel is not particularly explicit as to what the photographs show—it is as though the reader has to be kept at a distance, as though what the images reveal is too shocking to contemplate—they seem to depict the activities of Pinochet's death squads. The narrator does not claim to have seen the work, but bases his report on an account from a "Lieutenant Julio César Muñoz Caro, who years later was to publish a self-denunciatory memoir entitled *Neck in a Noose* relating his activities during the early years of the military regime" (84). So the novel presents itself as part of a chain of more or less uncertain testimony or confession. Muñoz Caro tells us that the exhibition comprises "hundreds of photos" that adorn "the walls and part of the ceiling" of the spare bedroom of the small flat. They seem to focus on the victims of the atrocities: "Muñoz Caro claims to have recognized the Garmendia sisters and other missing persons in some of the photos. Most of them were women. [. . .] The women looked like mannequins, broken, dismembered mannequins in some pictures. [. . .] A photo of a young blonde woman who seemed to be dissolving into the air. A photo of a severed finger, thrown onto a floor of porous, grey cement" (88, 89). Moreover, the images show not simply the aftermath of the killings, but perhaps also the process, as

though the photography were an integral part of the torture: “Muñoz Caro could not rule out the possibility that up to thirty per cent of the subjects had been alive when the snapshots were taken” (88). If a “snuff film” is a film that depicts, or purports to depict, an actual death, then these are snuff photographs that show the act of killing itself.

My question to you is simple. Is what Carlos Wieder produces art? Or is it something else: the photograph as document, perhaps. But if it is art, what kind of art is it? Is it avant-garde or realist, for instance? Is it an art of celebration (a fascist art?) or an art of denunciation, maybe even a critique of the murderous regime? Pause the video, and write down some thoughts. While you do that, I’ll have a glass of whisky, but I’ll be right back.

Drinks Pairing: Whisky

The photography exhibition that Carlos Wieder organizes in the spare bedroom of a friend’s flat degenerates into a scene of trauma and shame. The first person to see its images of torture and dismemberment exits the room in “less than a minute [. . .] pale and shaken” (86). She vomits in the passageway and staggers to the front door. Others brave a little more time with what is described as “a kind of hell, but empty” and “an epiphany of madness,” but the celebratory atmosphere of what is meant to be a party has evaporated: “It was as if a high voltage current had run through the flat leaving us dumbstruck” (89). The people are no longer party-goers but “survivors” (91) of something more like a genocide. Agents from Military Intelligence arrive to take the incriminating photographs away in shoe boxes. A captain from the military academy urges everyone to “forget everything that happened here tonight.” As dawn approaches, the place is like the aftermath of a battle: “bottles, plates and overflowing ashtrays, a group of pale, exhausted men” (92). Only Wieder himself shows “no sign of fatigue, with a glass of whisky in his perfectly steady hand, contemplating the dark cityscape” (93). The whisky—the fact that he is drinking it at all, the way in which he can handle it with such nonchalance—is an index of his difference and distance from what surrounds him, the “distant star” that sheds an eerie light on the ways on this world.

The question of Carlos Wieder’s art is complicated by the fact that it mimics the activity of some members of the real Chilean avant-garde, who were fervently opposed to Pinochet and his murderous regime. Specifically, Wieder’s sky-writing calls to mind

similar stunts organized by the poet Raúl Zurita, who, as critic Gareth Williams reports, in June 1982 arranged to have his poem “La vida nueva” (“The New Life”) “transcribed by five aeroplanes over the skies of Manhattan” (“Sovereignty and Melancholic Paralysis” 133). But whereas Wieder’s poem is an encomium to death, Zurita’s celebrates God, and love, albeit sometimes in similarly counter-intuitive and contradictory ways: “MY GOD IS HUNGER / MY GOD IS SNOW / MY GOD IS NO / MY GOD IS DISILLUSIONMENT / MY GOD IS CARRION / MY GOD IS PARADISE / MY GOD IS PAMPA / MY GOD IS CHICANO / MY GOD IS CANCER / MY GOD IS EMPTINESS / MY GOD IS WOUND / MY GOD IS GHETTO / MY GOD IS PAIN / MY GOD IS / MY LOVE OF GOD” (Zurita, *Anteparadise* xv). As Zurita puts it, his poem was “composed as a homage to minority groups throughout the world and, more specifically, to the Spanish-speaking people of the United States.” As to why he chose to have it written in the sky: “I thought the sky was precisely place toward which the eyes of all communities have been directed, because they have hoped to find in it the signs of their destinies; therefore, the greatest ambition one could aspire to would be to have that same sky as a page where anyone could write” (xi). But by having Wieder beat Zurita to this gesture, almost a decade before Zurita’s sky-written poem, Bolaño suggests that Pinochet’s coup anticipates the avant-garde and dulls any contestatory power it may claim to have. In the words of Williams (who here follows a line of argument first advanced by the Chilean critic, Willy Thayer): “The military coup and consequent suspension of all law and political representation [. . .] was the avant-garde gesture that made national life succumb to a principle of authority in which the only legitimate language was that of the barked commands of the state’s military and police elite” (135). To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric, because Auschwitz is already a particularly barbaric poetry. Or to put this another way: a coup is a form of aestheticized politics that no amount of politicized aesthetics will ever undo.

Is this then “fascist” art, as critic Andreea Marinescu suggests when she argues that “Wieder seeks to employ art in the service of foundational fascist discourse” (“Fascism and Culture” 355)? *Distant Star* is, after all, an adaptation and expansion of a story originally found in Bolaño’s *Nazi Literature in the Americas* (*La literatura nazi en América*, 1996), a collection not unlike Jorge Luis Borges’s *A Universal History of Iniquity* (*Historia universal de la infamia*, 1935/1954), in which Ruiz-Tagle/Wieder originally appears as

Carlos Ramírez-Hoffman, whose “passage through literature” is described as leaving “a trail of blood” (Bolaño, *Nazi Literature* 215). What prompted Bolaño to tease out further the relationship between fascism and art by returning to the image of a pilot as both artist and serial killer? A Foreword to *Distant Star* suggests that the first iteration of the story merely “mirror[ed] or explode[d] others,” where what was wanted was a story that “would be, in itself, a mirror and an explosion” (1). Perhaps, in the rewritten version of his exploits, the point is that Carlos Wieder presents a tension or contradiction within fascism itself, holding up a mirror to barbarism that might also be its undoing from within.

Everything depends, of course, on how we define fascism. For Marinescu, it is “an ideology that is deeply concerned with establishing a mythical conception of time geared towards the production of an endless war against that which it interprets as outside of itself. Fascism emerges as a process of hyper-rigidifying boundaries, an attempt at containment.” Hence, for fascism, “the demarcation of spatial and temporal borders is a key concern” (345). Among the borders on which fascism insists is the separation of art from politics: “fascist literary discourse presents art as a sphere completely separate from politics and history, thus promoting a conception of the autonomy of art that seeks to cover its violent politics.” Drawing on the work of cultural theorist Klaus Theweleit, Marinescu adds then that fascism is “driven by a fear of dissolving borders, a reactive need to affirm the body's hardness and invulnerability” (346). Wieder's art is fascist in that it enacts a rupture, presenting the coup as marking the limit between a “before” and an “after” (“IN PRINCIPIO . . . CREAVIT DEUS”), and celebrating extermination as a “cleansing” that eliminates everything that no longer belongs.

Yet there is, especially in Wieder's final performance, also a countervailing tendency towards what French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari term “deterritorialization,” by which boundaries and borders are in fact breached and dissipated, and transcendence (hierarchical ordering) is replaced by immanence. The horror, surely, of the photography exhibition is that Pinochet's supporters are confronted with the real of the regime's effects, by which bodies are broken down and scattered and anything but invulnerable, and for which the pious litanies of a new order based on firm foundations no longer hold. In their immanent immersion in the scene created by the images with which Wieder plasters the wall and ceiling of the claustrophobic spare

bedroom in which the exhibition is held, the regime's right-hand men (and women) are confronted with an unapologetic barbarism that undoes any claim that the coup has somehow re-established civil order or propriety. Wieder apparently revels in this incarnation of fascism as what Deleuze and Guattari call "a war machine. [. . .] *A war machine that no longer had war as its object* and would rather annihilate its own servants than stop the destruction" (*A Thousand Plateaus* 230, 231; emphasis in original). From this perspective, and undermining its simultaneous drive to establish and demarcate differences and distinctions, "fascism is constructed on an intense line of flight, which it transforms into a line of pure destruction and abolition" (230). Wieder quite literally incarnates that line of flight, both as a pilot unpredictably threatening to disappear into the firmament, and as an artist who knows no limits. No wonder agents from Military Intelligence come to clean up the mess and put a stop to Wieder's unpredictable movement. Henceforth Wieder is exiled from liberalism and authoritarianism alike, and he abruptly vanishes.

3. *Ni olvido, ni perdón*

After the transition to democracy, there are some ineffectual and inconclusive official attempts to bring Wieder to justice: "in 1992 his name appear[s] prominently in a judicial report on torture and the disappearance of prisoners" (108) and he is tried *in absentia*. The defence put forward on his behalf is the classic one that "he had only done his duty as a Chilean" (110). In court, the indigenous maid of the murdered Garmendia sisters is briefly given a voice, to tell the "story of the Chilean nation" as "a story of terror" from first to last. But, caught up in the practicalities of transition, the pursuit of an anomalous fugitive such as Carlos Wieder is no longer a priority. "Chile forgot him" (111). The pact of amnesia sets in, as the basis for democratic coexistence in a country whose wounds would never fully heal.

The last part of the novel then depicts the effort to track down and enact a form of justice on Carlos Wieder, who, after much peregrination around Europe, is now living in a small seaside town not far from Barcelona, and not far either from where the narrator himself (and Bolaño, too) has ended up. The hunt is led by a Chilean former police officer, Abel Romero, who has been hired by a mysterious client with deep pockets to carry out what ultimately feels more like retribution or revenge. As Romero and the narrator travel up and down the Catalan coast on trains and buses, around them everyone else is going

about their business, including young people on a night out: “groups of boys and girls [. . .] getting on at one station and off at the next, as if it were a game” (148). But the narrator has no such sense of light-heartedness, especially as he realizes that he, too, has been caught up in a cycle of violence and extra-judicial calling to account. When he finally comes across Wieder (or is he going by Ruiz-Tagle or any of the other names he has taken on over the years?), “He didn’t look like a poet. He didn’t look as if he had been an officer in the Chilean Air Force. He didn’t look like an infamous killer. [. . .] Not at all” (145). Nervously, the narrator wonders what Romero will do with him: “Romero didn’t answer my question. I don’t want anyone to get hurt, I murmured” (141). But it is too late. This is the endgame of a deadly process that has been long unfolding—for years, if not decades or more. Romero, or his client, seems to be operating in line with the slogan that circulates post-dictatorship Latin America’s social movements: “no forgetting, no forgiveness.” It is hardly a satisfactory conclusion: “this really has been a dreadful business,” the narrator comments; “Well, what else could it have been?” Romero replies. A happy ending would have been false and unconvincing. The wonder is that we are ever convinced by them. Brushing history against the grain will always leave some sense of discomfort, as we realize our inevitable complicity in its ongoing violence.

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Song: "It's No Game (No. 1)" (David Bowie)