

**ROMANCE STUDIES:
Readings in Excess and Betrayal, from Modernism to the Present**

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Amulet: Roberto Bolaño and the History of the Future

The Chilean Roberto Bolaño is the most celebrated of recent Latin American writers. A long review essay in the *New York Review of Books* is entitled, simply, “The Great Bolaño” (Goldman). The equally prestigious *London Review of Books* notes that “In the English-speaking world Bolaño has already met with the kind of success that among Latin American writers only Gabriel García Márquez has achieved” (Wood). Both these assessments are posthumous, as this global fame came only after Bolaño’s untimely demise, at 50, in 2003. At that point, just one short book of his had been translated into English, and even in Spanish his monumental thousand-page novel, *2666*, was yet to be published. He is a literary celebrity who is conveniently absent, and many details of his life are obscured in a haze of legend. Fittingly, much of his work is about the legacy of writers who disappear and become subject to myth-making and rumour. *Amulet* (*Amuleto*, 1999) is an off-shoot of a much longer novel (*The Savage Detectives*, 1998) dedicated to that theme. Witnessing from the margins, belatedly, from the point of view of those who generally go unseen, it is also a requiem for a previous generation’s celebratory vision of Latin America as a region on a triumphant march of self-realization. It describes the way the region is haunted by the remnants of dreams that foundered on the rocks of reality.

1. Literature Beyond the Nation and Beyond the Present

Latin American literature achieved worldwide prominence in the 1960s and 1970s with the so-called “Boom” that featured authors such as the Colombian García Márquez and the Peruvian Mario Vargas Llosa (winners of the Nobel Prize for Literature, in 1982 and 2010 respectively). The Boom also established an identification of Latin America with “magic realism.” Bolaño is perhaps the first writer from the region to achieve such widespread success beyond it while shaking off that unhelpful association. As such, he has helped redefine Latin America and its culture.

If magic realism emphasized the fantastic, or encouraged its readers to do so, painting a picture in bright colours of exotic difference not always susceptible to reason, Bolaño’s work is more realist and less ostentatious. Indeed, his admirers admit that his prose can be ordinary: the *New Yorker* calls him “something of an anachronism: a great novelist who was not a great writer” (Harvey). But this ordinariness is a strength, not a weakness. The

plainness of his style is a reaction against embellishment. He aims to tell things as they are, and here especially to describe Latin America as it is, against romantic or exoticized visions. So what is the image that *Amulet* offers? How does the book portray Mexico, Mexico City, and even Latin America as whole? And to what extent does this image confirm or refute our expectations? Pause the video, and write down some ideas. While you do that, I'll have a pisco sour, but I'll be right back.

Both Chile and Peru claim pisco—a form of brandy or distilled fermented grape juice—as their national drink. Pisco's origins date back to colonial times, when the grapes used were imported from Europe but the colony was forbidden from exporting wine. The word "pisco," also the name of city in southern Peru, is from the Quechua for "bird." So the drink occupies the faultline of colonial relations between Spain and its colonies, and of the conflictual history between independent postcolonial states. For the dispute between Chile and Peru over pisco, which has been fought out in the media and international courts, is, as Jerry Mitchell and William Terry note, "a proxy war contesting the outcome of the War of the Pacific" (525), in which, between 1879 and 1884, Chile expanded its northern territorial borders, encroaching upon Peru's pisco-producing region. There is a lot of history that goes into the drink. A pisco sour, meanwhile, is a cocktail of pisco, lime juice, simple syrup, and egg whites. It is distinctively different in the two countries: smoother in Chile, but equally potent.

In *Amulet*, Mexico is a very urban space: the setting does not shift from the megalopolis, Mexico City, and we are a long way for instance from García Márquez's sleepy small-town Macondo. The novel portrays a city of bars and cafés, apartment blocks and hotels. The central institution here is UNAM, the National Autonomous University of Mexico, whose "boundless campus" (58) is the size of many cities—in 2020, it had well over 365,000 students enrolled. And it is at the UNAM that *Amulet's* narrator, a Uruguayan named Auxilio Lacouture, occasionally works, and where she finds herself trapped in a fourth-floor bathroom for over a week while the army occupy the university as part of the state repression of the student movement in 1968.

In its invocation of political violence, Bolaño's novel offers a more familiar image of Latin America, as a site of coups and revolutions, human rights abuses and guerrilla warfare. Yet although 1968, state brutality, and particularly the massacre of protestors in a plaza

in the city's Tlatelolco district, are all at the book's heart, the violence itself is off-stage. Hidden in the bathroom, Lacouture sees very little of what is going on at that moment, and is drawn instead to memories of the past and even reveries of the future. She is at the very centre of things, but precisely for that reason her vision is impeded. At best she catches uncertain glimpses: "I climbed up to the only window in the bathroom and peered out. I saw a lone soldier far off in the distance. I saw the silhouette or the shadow of a tank, although on reflection I suspected that it might have been the shadow of a tree. It was like the portico of Latin or Greek literature" (31; translation modified). Unable to get a clear view, her thoughts turn to literature, and to a classical architecture of the European past.

The sense that the novel can only provide a representation aslant may prompt us also to ask just how Latin American an author Bolaño was, and not just in light of his work's subsequent global success. His is a view from the margins, always belated. For he was an itinerant writer: born and brought up in Chile, he moved to Mexico in his youth, may (or may not) have returned briefly to Chile in the early 1970s before leaving again with Augusto Pinochet's coup, and he then migrated to Spain, which is where, living near Barcelona, he wrote the books that won him belated renown. *His fiction, whether set in Chile or Mexico, is therefore as much about a memory of Latin America as it is about the region's actuality, even if that memory is sometimes also a memory of the future.* In *Amulet* we have a Chilean, in Spain, remembering Mexico's national trauma through the experience of a Uruguayan hiding in a bathroom and *her* memories and visions.

Lacouture's revelations or prognostications include an anticipatory history of the world republic of letters over the next several centuries: "Virginia Woolf shall be reincarnated as an Argentinean fiction writer in the year 2076. Louis-Ferdinand Céline shall enter Purgatory in the year 2094. Paul Eluard shall appeal to the masses in the year 2101" (159) and so on. At the same time, Bolaño is writing himself into that same prospective genealogy: *Amulet* shall be read in British Columbia in the year 2022.

2. *A Lost Generation*

Lacouture presents herself at the novel's outset as "the mother of Mexican poetry" (1) and even the "mother of all the poets" (58), with a particular connection to young Arturo Belano, an alter-ego of Bolaño himself: "I met him, I was his friend, and he was my

favorite young poet, although he wasn't Mexican" (59). It is not immediately clear what is involved in this maternal role (and she later withdraws the self-ascription), but it seems to be mostly a matter of watching and worrying: "They were all growing up under my watchful eye, not that it afforded them much protection. They were all growing up exposed to the storms of Mexico and the storms of Latin America, which are worse, if anything, because they are more divided and more desperate" (44). Lacouture has little power to intervene, to shape in any active way her young charges' destinies, but she can at least take on the task of witnessing their struggles and even the outcome of their mistakes, as she does when she tails Belano and his friend, Ernesto San Epifanio, to their encounter with the "King of the Rent Boys" in a run-down area of the city that she describes (with a nod to Bolaño's future novel) as "more like a cemetery than an avenue, not a cemetery in 1974 or in 1968, or 1975, but a cemetery in the year 2666" (86). She prefaces the tale of this "adventure" with the declaration: "I saw it. I can testify" (81). Though she is not called on to attest to her friends' (her children's) *bona fides* at the time—she says absolutely nothing, but she does lend Belano a knife just in case—she elaborates and maintains the memory, the legend, of their confrontation with danger.

Similarly, in the UNAM bathroom, Lacouture's sense that she has to resist (32), to remain undiscovered and survive as the sole witness to the occupation, is bound up with the sensation that she is in childbirth (in labour). A soldier enters while she is hiding in one of the stalls, and she "lifted [her] feet (quietly) like a Renoir ballerina, as if I were about to give birth (and in a sense, in effect, I was preparing to deliver something and to be delivered myself), with my underpants around my skinny ankles like a pair of handcuffs" (29). When the soldier finally leaves, and she hears "his footsteps receding, I heard the door shutting, and my raised legs resumed their original position as if of their own their own initiative," she adds: "The birth was over" (31). At another point, still apparently part of the hallucination (or prophecy?) she is experiencing at the UNAM, Lacouture imagines herself being wheeled into an operating room: "I'm not going to have a baby, really? I'm not pregnant? I asked. And the doctors looked at me and said, No, Ma'am, we're just taking you to attend the birth of History" (152). Like the English "attend" (compare "attend at" with "attend to"), the Spanish verb here, "*asistir*," can mean both "be present" and "care for." The name "Auxilio" means "help" or "assistance." What help can she offer the young poets, destined to oblivion, or the student movement,

doomed to defeat? She can be with them, witness, and remember. "I am the memory" (274), she says, of a history that will otherwise be erased. This is what mothers do!



Student demonstration, Mexico City, August 27, 1968

History survives as myth, as rumour, as mothers' tales or tall stories that are passed down through the generations. The figure of Lacouture herself is the product of such stories: as the critic Ryan Long tells us, she is based on "the Uruguayan poet and educator Alcira Soust [. . . who] was in fact trapped in the Philosophy and Literature bathroom in 1968. She met Bolaño in 1970 and saw him for the last time in 1976. After decades working odd jobs in and out of the university, and suffering from mental illness, she returned to Uruguay in 1988, where she died in 1997" ("Traumatic Time" 129). Her tale was, as Lacouture is imagined describing it, dismissed as "just university folklore, another of Mexico City's urban legends" (*Amulet* 177), but, because it is also his story (and history), Bolaño passes it on to a subsequent generation that missed the radicalism of the 1960s, and its 1970s defeat.

Amulet concludes with an extraordinary vision of the lost generation that this story has both to skip and to commemorate. Lacouture sees an immense valley and, sweeping through it, "a multitude of young people, an interminable legion of young people on the march to somewhere. [. . .] They were united only by their generosity and courage. [. . .] They were walking toward the abyss. I think I realized that as soon as I saw them. A shadow or a mass of children, walking unstopably toward the abyss" (181, 182). This crowd of doomed youth are singing, blissfully innocent of their fate: "And I heard then sing. I hear them singing now, even though I am not in the valley, a barely audible murmur, the prettiest children of Latin America, the ill-fed and the well-fed children" (183). They are like the kids lured by the music of the fabled Pied Piper, except that the song they sing is their own. Lacouture can do nothing to dissuade them or to forestall their fate. All she, and Bolaño, can do is ensure that the echoes of their song, the traces of that generosity and courage, endure as both promise and warning. The song is, as the book's very last words have it, "our amulet" (184): a charm to ward off the destruction that a lost generation was unable even to contemplate.

Bolaño often writes as though he did not expect to have any readers, or as though he would only be read far into the future. His books are time capsules (similarly, Auxilio Lacouture calls the bathroom in which she is stuck a "timeship" [56]) that he hopes will one day be unearthed, much like Roman amulets have been dug up by archaeologists over the centuries. This is not the "magic" usually associated with Latin America; it is more clear-eyed and more melancholy, mixed with the muck of ordinary household

detritus, the ruins of history. Perhaps it is simply more disenchanted or desperate. But Bolaño's wager is that these artifacts have sufficient appeal, both force of attraction and cry for help, that they may persist until such time as we are ready to read them.

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Song: "El pueblo unido" (Inti Illimani)