THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
Department of French, Hispanic & Italian Studies

RMST 202

Romance Studies, Modernism to the Present

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Amulet: Roberto Bolaño and the History of the Future

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Amulet: Roberto Bolaño and the History of the Future

with Jon Beasley-Murray

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The Chilean Roberto Bolaño is the most celebrated of recent Latin American writers.

“The Great Bolaño”
(*New York Review of Books*)

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“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.”
(*London Review of Books*)

Witnessing from the margins, belatedly, from the point of view of those who generally go unseen, *Amulet* is 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.

LITERATURE BEYOND THE NATION AND BEYOND THE PRESENT

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Bolaño is perhaps the first writer from the region to achieve widespread success beyond it while shaking off that unhelpful association. He has helped redefine Latin America and its culture.

“He was something of an anachronism: a great novelist who was not a great writer.” (*The New Yorker*)

But this ordinariness is a strength, not a weakness. The plainness of his style is a reaction against embellishment.

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He aims to tell things as they are, and here especially to describe Latin America as it is, against romantic or exoticized visions.

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?

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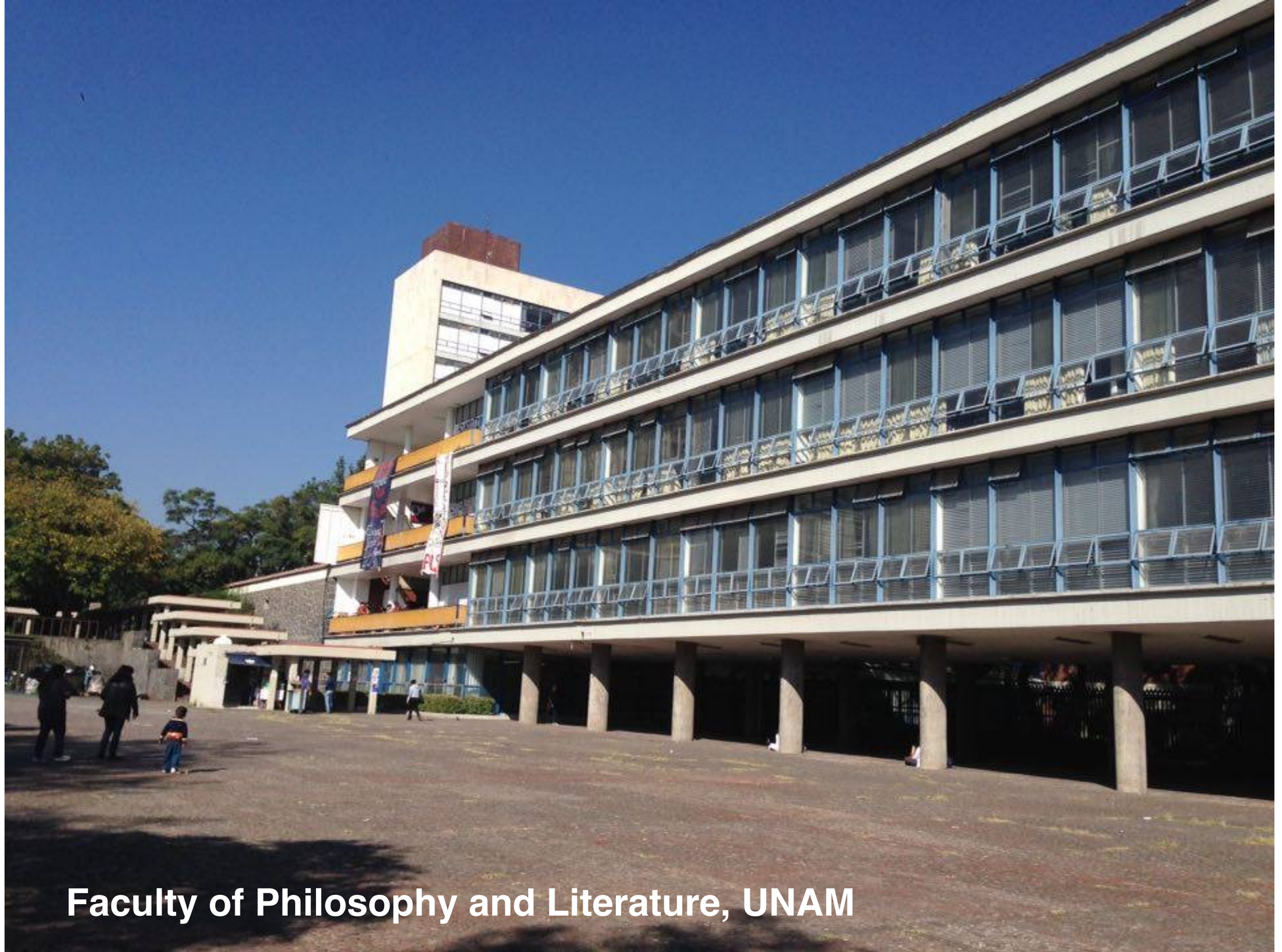
And to what extent does this image confirm or refute our expectations?

In *Amulet*, Mexico is a very urban space. The novel portrays a city of bars and cafés, apartment blocks and hotels.

It is at the UNAM that *Amulet*'s narrator, a Auxilio Lacouture, 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.



Faculty of Philosophy and Literature, UNAM

In its invocation of political violence, Bolaño's novel offers a more familiar image of Latin America. 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.

Lacouture 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)

Bolaño’s is a view from the margins, always belated. His fiction, whether set in Chile or Mexico, is 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.

“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)

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Amulet shall be read in British Columbia in the year 2022.

A LOST GENERATION

“the mother of Mexican poetry” (1);
“mother of all the poets” (58).

“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.

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"I saw it. I can testify" (81).

She elaborates and maintains the memory, the legend, of their confrontation with danger.

“I heard a flowering of air and water and lifted my 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)

“I heard his footsteps receding, I heard the door shutting, and my raised legs resumed their original position as if of their own their own initiative.

“The birth was over.” (31)

“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,” 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.

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“I am the memory.” (274)

History survives as myth, as rumour, as mothers' tales or tall stories that are passed down through the generations.

“The Uruguayan poet and educator Alcira Soust [. . .] 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.” (Long, “Traumatic Time”)

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.

“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 unstoppably toward the abyss” (181, 182).

“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)

All Lacouture, 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 “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 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.

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.

MUSIC

Pianochocolate,
“Romance”

PRODUCTION

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