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## The Savage Detectivism of Roberto Bolaño's Fiction

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**Abstract:** The present study analyses Roberto Bolaño's engagement with marginality in the novels *The Savage Detectives* and *2666*, via the conventions of the *noir* genre. The aesthetics of the peripheral, the poetics of triviality, vagrancy, bohemian wanderlust, and enigmatic rituals are performed in an inimitable personal style that problematizes issues pertaining to the theory of literature and the theory of the novel. Atomised, puzzle-like novels with deliberately obscure police procedural plots, *The Savage Detectives* and *2666* break several authorial and narrative architectural patterns, becoming major landmarks in today's novelistic worldscape.

**Keywords:** Roberto Bolaño; *The Savage Detectives*; *2666*; Marginality; Poetics of Triviality; Vagrancy; Bohemia; *Roman Noir*.

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In this study I will be exploring two of Roberto Bolaño's outstanding novels<sup>1</sup>. To start with, I will be looking at *The Savage Detectives*, a subversive novel about a horde of poets, with the purpose of sketching a history – or, rather, providing an atypical, polemical overview – of both underground and mainstream poetry. The second novel I will be approaching, *2666*, amplifies and expands *The Savage Detectives*, so much so that the link connecting the two *hard* novels is overemphasized by the Chilean author himself (in terms of theme, structure and style). Marginality, which becomes central in *The Savage Detectives*, sets an initiatory matrix forcefully deployed also in the novel *2666*.

Both novels are based on a vortex structure and delve into the ritualistic and detectivistic wanderings of some characters, which implicitly reveal the author's literary peregrinations. Bolaño was himself a wanderer and a collector of books, influences, authors, and ideas. The fascination with ontological and literary vagrancy in his essential books has largely shaped not only the image of Bolaño as an Odyssean bohemian, as a *hippie drifter*,<sup>2</sup> but also that of his ideal reader as an Odysseus-like navigator. Savage detectivism belongs

simultaneously to the characters, the author and the reader, given that both of the novels examined here are predicated on the virtuously repetitive filtering of one and the same story through the lens of different types of speech and narrative modes, whose pluri-perspectivism lends itself to gourmet literary deciphering.<sup>3</sup> Both *The Savage Detectives* and *2666* are composite, baroque-postmodern, novels with an Arcimboldian structure.<sup>4</sup> There are several influences Bolaño's prose embraces: to start with, *The Odyssey* and *The Aeneid*, *The Divine Comedy* and Joyce's labyrinthine novel *Ulysses*.<sup>5</sup> To these we should add Bolaño's admiration for several fetish-authors: J. L. Borges (for the erudite entanglements of his essayistic and parabolic prose) or Julio Cortázar, (whose novel *Rayuela* – *Hopscotch* –) was considered totemic by the Chilean author). Another possible influence, in terms of erudite, quasi-detective writing, is Umberto Eco. The theme of endless pilgrimage may be derived from two sources: on the one hand, Spanish picaresque fiction, and on the other hand, the famous American wanderers of the twentieth century, epitomized in a bohemian and neorealist key by Jack Kerouac.

As mentioned above, *The Savage Detectives* is an underground novel about a horde of wild, passionate, barbaric poets; hence, the exacerbated sexuality of its members, their emphatic alcoholism, their artistically stimulating drug addiction, and brazen, *devil-may-care* language. The text is intentionally duplicitous, as the author's and the characters' detective work eventually spills over into the reader's savage detective approach. Bolaño's novel is, as the author states, a love epistle to his generation, but, as mentioned above, it is also a

pamphlet. *The Savage Detectives* turns out to be not just an underground novel about poetry, but also a spectral book about living people, parasitically invaded by or obscurely initiated into death, despite their intense sexual and intellectual lives. Like a *film noir*, the novel is loosely anchored in a bleak groundwater pool that obscures the stories, mixing them up, shattering and re-assembling them, toward enigmatic ends.

The subject of the novel *The Savage Detectives* suffers from an incoherence that craves to become coherent: the picaresque quest of the poetess Cesareea Tinajero, concealed in time and space, turns, at one point in the novel, into an *eidolon* (a fantasy that seems real). Cesareea Tinajero wrote a single poem, then withdrew from the literary underground to become anonymous and obscure. At the end of the novel there is, symptomatically, a testimony of this character's accidental death.

*The Savage Detectives* is a novel with complications that allow for various interpretations. It is, from a postmodern viewpoint, a novel about the haphazard: everything seems to be happening by chance, accidentally. The chapters, which are concentrated life reports, with factual and ontological details, seem to have been written at random. Nothing depends on anything else, and the novel is (or becomes) "savage" also because it is determined and dominated by chance. There are no main, only secondary characters, or possibly an underground collective character, made up of the mass of the visceral-realist poets (as they call themselves) and the witnesses of their exploits. *The Savage Detectives* is also a novel about alienation and spiritual malaise: the chapters about fools are the most exciting in the book, for Bolaño's

demonstration is that artistic madness is compulsively necessary in today's world, as well as at all times in history.

But manic enthusiasm is not the only reason for the world triumph of Bolaño's prose style. While *The Savage Detectives* is a novel about poetry and poets, or about how poetry surpasses prose, it does, ultimately, mount its arguments through prose. Bolaño often derides in his novel interpretive approaches to poetry and does so precisely because his belief in poetry is a paradoxical one: on the one hand, poetry is a supreme art (with a maximalist purpose), and on the other hand, the characters in *The Savage Detectives* do not write with the explicit goal of publishing, but because of the special ontological reason, of knowing themselves and explore how far they can go along the minimalist path, steeped in neorealism, of everyday aesthetics. Bolaño's novel ironically narrates a sort of history of *jungle-literature*, with its strategies, tactics, verdicts, plots, and detective entanglements, targeting two camps of authors and creators: on the one hand, the visceral-realists, and on the other hand, the inhabitants of Stridentopolis (a utopian city inhabited by the visceral-realists' poetic rivals). Everyone talks about poetry or reads poetry in this novel, and poetry is linked to sex, poverty, alcohol, drugs, and the idea of human sewage.

Moreover, the book has the merit of focusing on the lyricism of miserabilism, and, above all, on a new aesthetics of ugliness, described at leisure, through various leitmotifs. The metaphor (or symbol) of the pigsty is frequently employed, but it is a creative pigsty predicated on the notion that literature is born out of human misery. This is why *The Savage Detectives* is a novel full

of sweat, vomit, pestilence, stench, filth, of pariahs, aborted beings, and swinish creatures (both physically and mentally). This is a tendentious book about a kind of literary lumpenproletariat, driven by the new aesthetics of the ugly. The squalid reality of *The Savage Detectives* emanates and animates what we might call the progeny of Caliban, stranded on an experimental creative island, where they practise this new aesthetics of the ugly, but without Ariel or Prospero as representatives of the old literature, of a traditional canon that must be suppressed or forgotten. The nihilistic dimension of the novel and the pessimism with which the characters (vagrants and marginals) are tinged expose a somewhat exotic and innovative criminality. The grotesque is bleaker than usual, that is, it steps beyond its classic boundaries and becomes *noir*.

On a larger scale, the novel *2666* narrates the story of the life of an underground German writer by the name of Benno von Archimboldi (the pseudonym of Hans Reiter). Von Archimboldi's work is researched and promoted by four gourmet readers (from Paris, Turin, Madrid, and London, respectively). The novel branches off into several spectacular layers, comprising hundreds of life-and-death histories that acquire meaning through their congregation. *2666* is, in fact, also a novel that theorises upon the way in which marginality can become central. Bolaño thus promotes his own literary creed, turning the periphery into a rhizome from which an aesthetically valid literature is profusely expanding, with all the risks of confronting the colonisation tactics deployed by the hegemonic centre.

Not only Benno von Archimboldi is a marginal: so are all the artistic figures the author includes in his Mendeleev Table of

literary marginality. Roberto Bolaño is obsessed with this paradigm shift in which marginality can become the essential object and the supreme subject of spiritual inquiry. Trivial things acquire importance, and the grandiose is banished, eliminated, or dimmed down. Sequins and baubles are also discarded so as to promote a slang- or jargon-infused register that could replace canonical, traditional understandings of the literary.

Roberto Bolaño's style, in turn, advocates a (minor) aesthetics of the periphery. His phrases are captivating by the way they convey the appearance of the banal and the everyday, the author excelling at describing inconsequential things. These provide the make-up of reality, which is why Bolaño's phrases are full of references to the trifling materiality of the world. But it is precisely their slow-motion description that transforms them into the central subject, that metamorphoses them into something essential, separating them from their peripheral matrix and divesting them from their marginality. The banal and the peripheral offer incentives for Bolaño's fluidity; everything that is marginal is deliberately turned into something essential and central.

Roberto Bolaño's magisterial novels propose different versions of quests: the characters are afflicted with a kind of disease, obsessively searching, or even becoming infected from their search, as they continually come across riddles to be solved in amateur detective fashion. The search is never about people or beautiful and grandiose things. It is always about artistic minorities who acquire centrality and essence in the very act of being investigated by others, thanks to the obscurity that they are enveloped in and that can be only partially or relatively revealed.

The third volume of *2666* explores, once again, on the identity, life, and origins of the writer Benno von Archimboldi: his beginnings as a reader, his initiators, his reading experience, etc. The narrative focuses on the bohemian Berlin life of von Archimboldi, outlining then his experience, as a soldier, in World War II. These histories are marginal, peripheral, but have the same propensity to become central. Eventually, the reader learns how Hans Reiter becomes Benno von Archimboldi: the story binds up shards and crumbs of his existence as an outsider and a pariah, in the same ostensibly enigmatic tone that can be deciphered only partially. Everything is or seems unimportant, secondary, but becomes essential and primordial. This is the point at which the theory of the secondary is advanced by an old man who owns a French typewriter, loaned to von Archimboldi. The old man, who is a covert literary theorist, serves as a mouthpiece for the novel's intention to reveal how minor works, written by mysterious authors, may become, in time, innovative masterpieces, that is, major texts.<sup>6</sup> Not only authors and artists are mysterious. Unveiling their identity is also part of a complicated script designed to be enigmatic. The journey is undertaken not in the visible and diurnal universe of reason and lucidity, but in the subliminal, underground, *noir* world of the human (artistic) condition. A rarefied nihilism envelops Bolaño's prose like a film: his two novels are, as a matter of fact, highly cinematic, despite the author's convoluted stylistics and penchant for verbal expressive means.

The novel *2666* continues with the history of the writing and publication of Benno von Archimboldi's books: the reception

of this author is minimal, discreet, and obscure. In keeping with this theory of the secondary, the writer is, in fact, or could be a genius. Gradually, Benno von Archimboldi becomes famous unwittingly and unknowingly, slowly and stealthily, or in an occult way, adapted to circumstances. His writing is perceived as a form of extreme initiation for readers, publishers, and literary critics, so much so that von Archimboldi is translated into several foreign languages and even appears on the list of possible candidates for the Nobel Prize. Obviously, the novel's end is suggesting that anything can happen next, nothing is stable or clear, everything is transformed, nothing remains unchanged and nothingness itself can, in fact, be full of meaning.

Anamorphic and Arcimboldian, *The Savage Detectives* and *2066* are novels that push to the ground, albeit fleetingly, the pedal of nihilism, by relying on the revelatory potential of crime, which may be invested with an artistic meaning. The miserabilism in these novels has a purpose – however wrapped up in mystery it

might be – designed to act as an incentive to detective deciphering, and not just of the characters who haunt and rummage through reality, but also on the part of the reader. Roberto Bolaño's two novels could be perceived as mystery novels, turning around the enigmas inextricably enmeshed in artistic creation. While, in its early days, the *noir* novel was considered a subcategory of crime fiction, Bolaño removes it from the shackles of genre literature and, thanks to his vision of the redeemed secondary, grants it centrality. In his *noir* narratives, the Chilean author also intersperses some Gothic streaks (or, in fact, neo-Gothic), even if they are rather flimsy. The *thriller* runs through Roberto Bolaño's narrative and stylistic blood, hence the way in which, in spite of his writing spreading over hundreds and hundreds of pages, which can be overwhelming, he captivates his readers and turns them into long-haul fans. Of course, this may also pique the enemies of Bolaño's narrative structures and style, who are nonetheless as passionate as the author's worshipers.

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## NOTES

1. I have so far published three essays and studies on Roberto Bolaño, as follows: Ruxandra Cesereanu, "Hoarda Poeților: Fiii lui Caliban," *Steaua*, 7-8, 2014, pp. 35-36; Ruxandra Cesereanu, "Roberto Bolaño – *2666* și teoria minoratului," *Transilvania*, no. 7, 2017, pp. 72-76; Ruxandra Cesereanu, "Roberto Bolaño - fenomenul feminicid din romanul *2666*," *Transilvania*, no. 8, 2017, pp. 5-9.
2. Daniel Zalewski, "Vagabonds. Roberto Bolaño and His Fractured Masterpieces," *The New Yorker*, March 26, 2007.
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