

The Visceral Realists strike again

Roberto Bolaño's Chilean satires

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Roberto Bolaño

LOS DETECTIVES SALVAJES
609pp. Barcelona: Anagrama. 13euros.
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DISTANT STAR
Translated by Chris Andrews
149pp. Harvill. £11.99.
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Between 1996 and his death, at the age of fifty, in 2003, Roberto Bolaño, previously a little-known poet, published eleven novels, which brought him fame and commercial success even as his health collapsed. His death in the midst of a period of torrential productivity has complicated assessment of a figure whose place in Spanish American letters was already difficult to pin down. A Chilean forced into exile at the age of twenty, Bolaño lived most of his adult life in Mexico and Spain. Many of his novels have the form of detective stories. His central work, a 609-page literary pastiche called *Los detectives salvajes* (1998), won two of the Hispanic world's major literary awards, the Herralde Novel Prize in Barcelona and the Rómulo Gallegos Prize in Venezuela. Not yet available in English, it is one of the major works of Spanish American postmodernism.

Bolaño's understanding of postmodernism was shaped by his experience of exile. Behind his recycling of popular forms and ironic manipulation of grand cultural currents lies a lament for lost wholeness. A melancholy awareness of vanished social cohesion lends his novels a humanity that delves deeper than their clever surfaces might lead the reader to expect.

Bolaño's great subject is the dispersal of social groups and the individual's relegation to a void dominated by randomness and solitude. In *Distant Star*, the dispersal is caused by a political calamity that dispatches the characters into exile. *Los detectives salvajes* ("The wild detectives"), by contrast, opens in 1976 as an artistic *Bildungsroman* narrated by a seventeen-year-old aspiring Mexico City poet named Juan García Madero. Compelled by his uncle and aunt to study law, García Madero frequents poetry workshops where he meets members of a movement known as "los real visceralistas" – the Visceral Realists.

The epicentre of Visceral Realist activity is the home of the Font family, whose alluring daughters, María and Angélica, are accomplished poets. García Madero adopts the rebellious attitude of the Visceral Realists, who are described as existing somewhere between Surrealism and Marxism; he writes poems, neglects his studies and has sex with several young women, including María Font.

Living hand-to-mouth, the Visceral Realists satirize the great Spanish American poets. As is statutory in recent novels about Mexico City intellectual life, Octavio Paz is subjected to relentless ridicule: his formalism, his clothes, his Cadillac, his wife, and even his name, come in for criticism. In spite of these satiric elements, the novel appears to be on course to narrate the story of a young artist's coming of age. It is a surprise when, 140 pages in, Bolaño de-rails this plan.

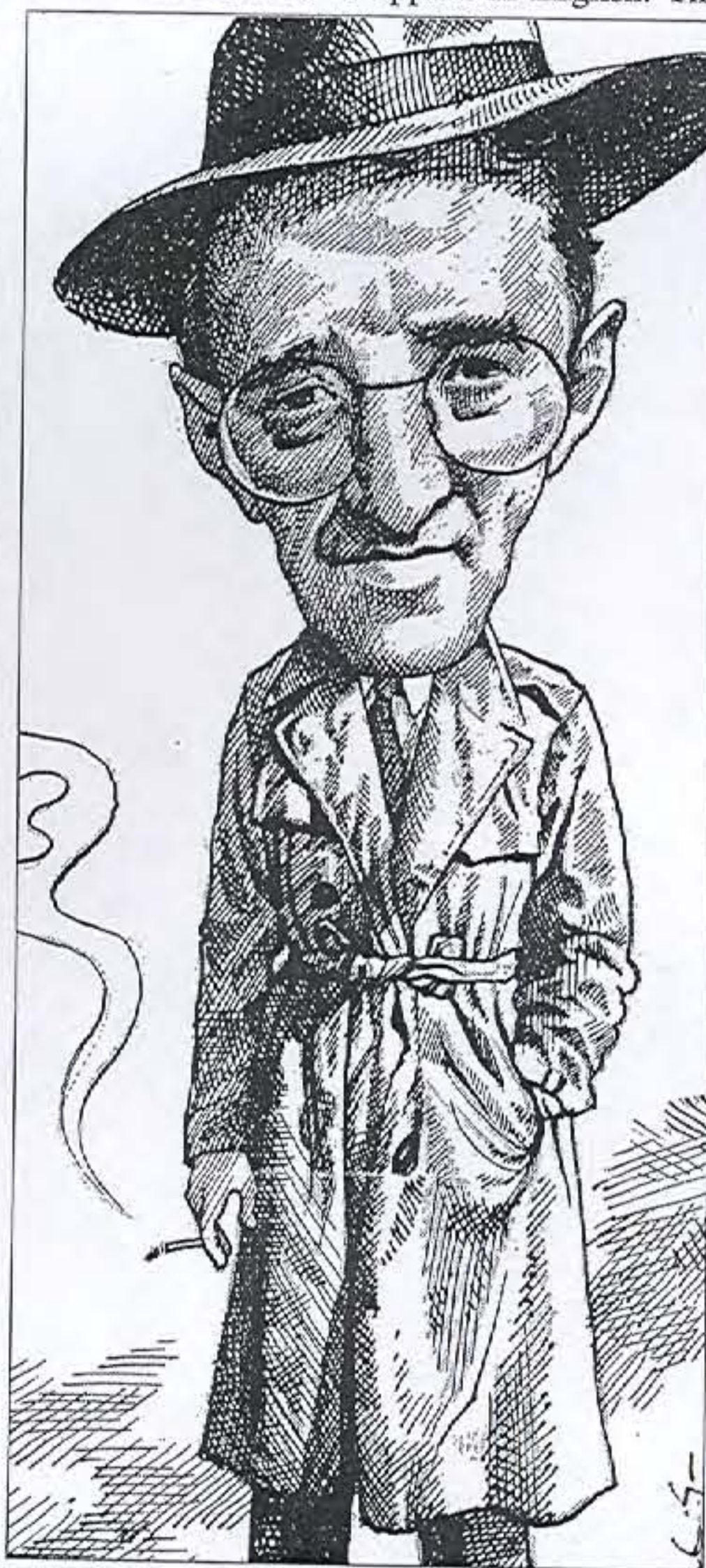
The seamy side of Mexico City catches up with the Visceral Realists in a series of violent encounters with thugs. Quim Font, the father of María and Angélica, succumbs to mental illness. When two of the young Visceral Realists, Ulises Lima and Arturo Belano, leave the capital on a mysterious quest through Northern Mexico, the group begins to break up. The narrative structure mimics this fragmentation: García Madero's

voice is supplanted by a succession of more than thirty different narrators, who relate their encounters with former members of the Visceral Realist movement in half a dozen countries between 1976 and 1996. Through their eyes, the reader watches a generation of idealistic young people losing their way. The dispersal of the Visceral Realist group becomes a metaphor for the dissolution of a Spanish American literary culture, one that laid claim to continental unity and the ability to make statements that resonated beyond the literary world. Bolaño's characters, here as in his other novels, are compulsive readers, matching each experience to a literary reference. Yet the fabric of allusions shared by literate Spanish Americans is shredding; far from altering perceptions of the world, the Visceral Realists' antics become meaningless. To some extent, this is the view of a former poet looking back on poetry circles from the presumptuous vantage point of the novel. It is telling that the major Spanish American novelists escape Bolaño's satire. The Chilean novelist José Donoso (1924–96), against whose baroque modernism Bolaño's taut postmodernism is reacting, makes a walk-on appearance, but even Donoso is not identified by name.

Ulises Lima and Arturo Belano carry their quest from Spanish America to Europe and the Middle East. They claim to be looking for information about the life of Cesárea Tinajero, a Mexican avant-garde poet of the 1920s. Tinajero also belonged to a movement known as Visceral Realism, a fact that reinforces the futility of the young poets' efforts to create an art that is new. Ulises Lima, in a parodic debase-ment of the Ulysses story, becomes a traveller without a destination; his odyssey grows meaningless. At one point, on a trip to Israel in search of a former girlfriend, he befriends a large Austrian, fails to realize that the man is a neo-Nazi spy, and ends up in jail. During the 1980s, accompanying a group of Mexican writers to Nicaragua to show solidarity with the revolution, Lima misses his plane home and takes two years to find his way back to Mexico City. By the end of the novel he barely speaks or acts. Arturo Belano, who came to Mexico as a refugee from southern Chile, has a surname that resembles that of his creator. Like Bolaño, he settles in Barcelona and enjoys success as a novelist until he is struck by a fatal illness. Throwing himself into reporting African wars, Belano is last seen on a Liberian battlefield. The final section, returning to García Madero's narration of events in 1976, pulls the rug out from under Lima and Belano's quest for Cesárea, concluding with an image of emptiness that abandons language altogether. In spite

of the extreme bleakness of Bolaño's vision, the reader carries out of this great novel a mass of vivid incident recounted by a supple voice effortlessly at home in several countries and equally persuasive in writing from the points of view of characters who are Mexican, Spanish or Chilean, female or male, gay or straight, Catholic or Jewish.

After *Los detectives salvajes*, Bolaño's shorter novels feel like elegant slivers. *Distant Star*, published in Spain in 1996, is the second of Bolaño's novels to appear in English. The



translation by Chris Andrews, who also translated Bolaño's *Nocturno de Chile* (2000) as *Night in Chile* (2003), is both inventive and precise. The story opens in 1972 in the southern Chilean city of Concepción, where an aspiring writer named Alberto Ruiz-Tagle joins a poetry workshop. Salvador Allende is President of Chile. The young poets' literary passions blend with their political enthusiasms. Ruiz-Tagle, by contrast, does not discuss politics. In 1973, after General Augusto Pinochet's military coup, the members of the workshop scatter. They leave for exile in Europe or join revolutionary movements elsewhere in Latin America. Those who remain in Chile are imprisoned, tortured or murdered. The narrator, Arturo, who may be Arturo Belano, tries to understand the fate of his old friends. His claims to truth limited by lack of information, he says, "From here on, my story is mainly conjecture". Arturo believes Ruiz-Tagle to be responsible for the deaths of two beautiful poetry-writing sisters, who presage the Font sisters in the later novel. When

Arturo is imprisoned, a plane flies over the prison camp writing poems in the sky. The pilot, Carlos Wieder, becomes one of the cultural heroes of the Pinochet regime. Wieder flies to Antarctica and writes "Antarctica is Chile" in the sky. Newspaper photographs reveal Wieder and Ruiz-Tagle to be the same man. Released into exile in Europe, Arturo and his friend Bibiano O'Ryan try to reconstruct Wieder's artistic trajectory.

Much of the humour in the novel's early sections arises from in-jokes about Chilean poets. These sardonic moments pave the way for an investigation into the ominous paradox of the Fascist artist. An introduction presents *Distant Star* as a coda to another Bolaño novel, *La literatura nazi en América* (1996), the final chapter of which dealt with Lieutenant Ramírez Hoffman of the Chilean Air Force. *Distant Star* was written as "a longer story that, rather than mirroring or exploding others, was, in itself, a mirror and an explosion". The mirror does not reflect a great artist corrupted by Fascism, as in Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus*, but rather what passes for art under a Fascist regime, and the cost to the individual of producing this soulless kitsch. While the scattered former poets of *Los detectives salvajes* mourn the loss of literature's spiritual power, Wieder and his stunts, vacant from the outset, are mere simulacra of the artist and artistic creation.

A coarse miscalculation deprives Wieder of his position as the darling of the Pinochet elite. He holds an exhibition of photographs of the faces of women murdered by the regime, shown during torture or after death. Wieder's celebration of these images unsettles the guardians of "Christian civilization". He drops out of sight and his career spins into a nether world. Wieder may be the creator of a patriotic war game that catechizes young Chileans about the victory of "the Chilean race" over Peru and Bolivia in the War of the Pacific (1879–83). Escaping to Europe as democracy returns to Chile and investigations into the past implicate him in human-rights abuses, Wieder publishes derivative poems under pseudonyms in far-right fringe journals, works as a cameraman on pornographic films, and finally adheres to a Parisian cult whose mission is to deface great works of literature with body fluids.

Like Jorge Luis Borges's short story "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius", which can also be read as an anti-Fascist fable, *Distant Star* seeks to understand malevolent forces through the decipherment of obscure texts. Arturo and Bibiano resemble Borges and his friend Adolfo Bioy Casares in undertaking their sleuthing from a sedentary position. In the final chapters, Bolaño introduces an exiled Chilean detective to do the legwork to locate Wieder. The narrative's light touch and witty tone make harsh material uncomfortably easy to digest. Floating above the ideological fray, *Distant Star* achieves a poignant, disconcerting account of a man made rudderless by the loss of his humanity. Roberto Bolaño's response to extremism is to express compassion for the extremist. This imaginative sympathy enables his fiction to evoke meaninglessness in a way that is deeply human.