

## **“Latin America Is Sown with the Bones of These Forgotten Youths:” Revolution, Dictatorship, and Roberto Bolaño**

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When Roberto Bolaño accepted the Rómulo Gallegos Prize for *Los detectives salvajes* (*The Savage Detectives*, 1998), he declared: “for the most part, everything I’ve written is a love letter or a farewell letter to my own generation.”<sup>1</sup> Understanding Bolaño’s work in historical context requires knowledge of the author’s generation and his reference to it here. Bolaño and his contemporaries are scarred by battles, ideological and physical, between leftist utopian revolutionary movements in Latin America throughout the twentieth century and their brutal repression by right-wing military regimes that assumed power in the 1970s and 1980s. Bolaño came of age as a poet in Chile and Mexico amidst this traumatic history. In Spain in the 1990s, when his fiction began to attract attention from international publishers, newly re-democratized Latin American nations (and Spain, too, after its own civil war and dictatorship) struggled to reconcile this violent past. Bolaño, however, found new ways of confronting twentieth-century history through literature, rendering familiar narratives strange and implicating the reader in redefining the very historical context under scrutiny in his writing.

Declaring his work a “love letter or a farewell letter,” Bolaño elaborates on the political context that connects national histories in a shared experience of struggle:

my own generation, those of us who were born in the 1950s and who in a certain moment chose military service, though in this case it would be more accurate to say militancy, and we gave what little we had—the great deal that we had, which was our youth—to a cause that we thought was the most generous cause in the world and in a certain way it was, but in reality it wasn’t. . . . [W]e fought our hardest, but we had corrupt leaders, cowardly leaders with a

propaganda apparatus that was worse than a leper colony . . . [W]e fought for and put all our generosity into an ideal that had been dead for more than fifty years, and some of us knew it, . . . but we did it anyway, because we were stupid and generous, as young people are, giving everything and asking for nothing in return, and now those young people are gone, because those who didn't die in Bolivia died in Argentina or Peru, and those who survived went on to die in Chile or Mexico, and those who weren't killed there were killed later in Nicaragua, Colombia, or El Salvador. All of Latin America is sown with the bones of these forgotten youths. (*Last Interview* 41–42)

Bolaño's description deserves to be unpacked to reveal the complex, violent history he engages throughout his work.

First, “those of us born in the 1950s” came of age during the final bursts of revolutionary activity in the late 1960s and early 70s. This generation not only did not see their utopian dreams realized, they were brutally punished by right-wing military regimes that persecuted anyone associated with leftist political thought. These dictatorships, often coordinating intelligence through the CIA, installed a “security” apparatus employing torture, executions, disappearances, and exile. Bolaño's use of “military service” (“*milicia*”) and “militancy” (“*militancia*”) distinguishes between serving the armed forces of the state—an apparatus of persecution—and serving a political party or sometimes a guerilla army. He aligns himself with leftist militants fighting for social justice in opposition to the armed forces defending the status quo of inequality and persecution.

Yet Bolaño problematizes leftist utopianism: a cause “we thought was the most generous in the world, but in reality it wasn't.” It was a collective dream, a desire for a truly egalitarian society even if that meant having less for oneself, generous because so many were willing to put their lives on the line for it. But Bolaño distances himself from this noble cause, bitterly accusing leftist leaders of corruption, cowardice, propaganda, and repression; the ideal was worthy, but, he insists, the dream had already died in postrevolutionary realities.<sup>2</sup> Bolaño, distinguishing revolutionary dreams from realities on the ground, points out that young people

were killed by the military dictatorships that wiped out revolutionary hopes. This history is reiterated throughout Latin America, but he specifically cites Chile (1973) and Mexico (1968), followed by the bloody civil wars of Central America in the 1980s, violent flashpoints in Cold War battles. With the dramatic image of Latin America as one enormous graveyard “sown with the bones of these forgotten youths,” Bolaño insists that this violence defines the entire region. His writing is an effort to remember those young idealists, to march against the tide of forgetfulness that would wash away the past. He does so with a critical gaze that condemns dogmatism and violence on all sides of the political spectrum.

In his fiction, Bolaño masterfully interweaves the particulars of national histories, blending fiction and reality by blurring distinctions between his own autobiography and the experiences of his fictional alter ego, Arturo Belano, in Chile, Mexico, and Spain.<sup>3</sup> Both Bolaño’s biography and Belano’s experiences take the reader through the tumultuous history that marks the author’s entire oeuvre, as Bolaño transforms relationships between literature and politics. This essay chronicles crucial flashpoints in Chile and Mexico, concluding with Bolaño’s relationship to Europe and Latin America and the tension between the marginal poets populating his fiction, his own celebrated status in the international publishing industry, and his commitment to revitalizing the political relevance of the literary text.

### **Bolaño in Chile and “the Other September 11”**

Bolaño was born in Santiago in 1953. His family moved frequently, but he spent much of his childhood in small provincial cities. His mother was a schoolteacher, his father a truck driver and amateur boxer, marking his family as working class.<sup>4</sup> Bolaño, nerdy and bookish, did not like school. In 1968, the family moved to Mexico City, and there the adolescent Bolaño discovered his passion for poetry and revolution. Convinced that his generation would revolutionize poetry and change the world, he dropped out of high school to spend his time reading and writing. In August 1973, he set out for Chile by bus to take part in the socialist revolution

underway there. He was headed toward what would become one of the most significant chapters in Latin American history, culminating symbolically on the day of the military coup, which, after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, in the US, became known as “the other September 11.”

Chile, at that moment, was an experiment in socialism that the entire world was watching. In 1970, Salvador Allende, medical doctor turned politician, became the first Marxist Socialist to be elected President. Allende’s “Chilean path to socialism” via the ballot box offered a route distinct from armed guerilla movements arising in Latin America, particularly after the 1959 Cuban Revolution.<sup>5</sup> However, he won with barely a third of the vote (36.2 percent), revealing a citizenry divided almost equally between Allende’s center-left coalition (the UP, as the Unidad Popular, ‘Popular Unity,’ was known), the centrist Christian Democrats (28.7 percent), and the conservative party (34.9 percent). Facing a divided nation and a hostile Washington, Allende barely obtained the Congressional approval needed to assume office, but the UP pressed ahead with their agenda.

Chile’s short-lived experiment in democratic socialism was turbulent. Popular Unity was hardly a unanimous front, some within it favoring radical approaches to economic redistribution, others demanding moderate compromises. Nonetheless, with the enthusiastic support of union workers, peasants, and leftist intellectuals and artists, Allende nationalized the health care system and copper mining industry (a process initiated by his centrist predecessor); increased spending on education and public housing; created a successful program guaranteeing a half-liter of milk a day to Chilean children; and radicalized land redistribution programs begun in the 1960s. Peasants worked the land; workers took over factories; unemployment dropped and wages rose. This project inspired the young Bolaño, who identified with radical elements of the UP who believed in arming the people to defend socialism.<sup>6</sup>

The opposition, however, was powerful. US president Richard Nixon, backing the economic interests of US companies and the Chilean elite and afraid of another Latin American nation (after

Cuba) joining forces with the Soviet Union, famously ordered his operatives to “make the economy scream.” That they did, promoting a strike of truck drivers that brought distribution to a halt and hoarding products to maximize food shortages. With an increasingly polarized nation and regular rallies filling the streets with both Allende’s supporters and opponents, the centrist Christian Democrats joined the opposition, eventually calling for military intervention.<sup>7</sup>

In his storied trip, Bolaño had arrived in Chile just weeks before the coup. On the morning of September 11, 1973, the armed forces betrayed the constitution and attacked their own government. Allende, aware of the situation, delivered his last radio address, promising Chilean workers that eventually they would prevail. Mid-morning, fighter jets swooped over Santiago and bombed the presidential palace. Allende died of a gunshot wound to the head and a military junta seized control, initiating the sixteen-year, notoriously brutal regime of General Augusto Pinochet.<sup>8</sup> During those years, over three thousand citizens disappeared (detained by security forces with no public record of their whereabouts, all presumed dead). Over thirty thousand were tortured and released; hundreds of thousands more went into exile.<sup>9</sup> Bolaño reports having joined a militia to oppose the regime. He was arrested in Concepción, but a prison guard recognized him from school, and he was released unharmed. He then left for Mexico with no intention of returning.<sup>10</sup>

This story is repeated in nearly every biographical sketch of the author, including his own; various iterations are represented in Bolaño’s work through his fictional alter ego, Arturo Belano. It appears most extensively in *Los detectives salvajes* and the short story “Carnet de Baile” (“Dance Card” 2001). In *Estrella distante* (*Distant Star*, 1996), the unnamed narrator does not travel to or from Mexico, but is an aspiring poet in Chile in the early 1970s, detained near Concepción and released without mention of torture or abuse (in the novel, the violence of the period erupts instead with the character of a fictional fascist poet who murders female poets and writes victorious verses in the sky). Other characters—such as “El Ojo Silva,” the Argentine mentor of the character “B” in

“Sensini,” Amalfitano (2666 [2004], *Los sinsabores del verdadero policía* [*The Woes of the True Policeman* 2011]), and the many exiles who take turns narrating the middle section of *Detectives*—reiterate the theme of exile.<sup>11</sup> Bolaño’s fiction is populated with characters struggling to redefine themselves after the horror of state-sponsored terrorism. This aligns his work squarely with what is now known as postdictatorship literature: narratives that explore the consequences of dictatorship for individuals and the collective, either through *testimonio* or fictional accounts that mirror historical truths.<sup>12</sup> Bolaño’s fiction, though, has generated an unusual level of enthusiasm and debate; his distinctive handling of the topic takes familiar tropes of postdictatorship literature and shifts our gaze to new perspectives and stories.<sup>13</sup>

The symbolic importance of Chile’s history cannot be overstated: John Beverley identifies September 11, 1973, as the symbolic end of the Boom, the literary generation preceding Bolaño’s, marked by aesthetic innovation and the utopian conviction that literature would help shape an egalitarian future. Idelber Avelar takes up this interpretation of transitional moments—symbolic and real—to insist that the 1973 coup marks an historic rupture that defines the present in Latin America. Avelar posits postdictatorship novels as allegories of mourning of those killed by the regimes, but also a collective mourning of loss of faith in revolutionary narratives: postdictatorship literature is marked less by processes of re-democratization in the 1980s and 90s and more by a fundamental shift “from the authority of the state to that of the market,” brought about by dismantling socialist experiments and imposing a neoliberal economic model based on privatization and unregulated capitalism. Although the market success of Bolaño’s literature makes him suspicious to some, his texts are consistently, deeply critical of these unresolved legacies.

In fact, Bolaño’s “Chilean novels”—*Estrella distante* and *Nocturno en Chile* (*By Night in Chile* 2001)—are not only about life under dictatorship; they also critique the cultural amnesia involved in the complicated, compromised process of the return to democracy. In Chile, as in other nations, re-democratization has involved a tense negotiation between those demanding democratic accountability