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Repeating Translation, Left and Right (and Left Again)

Roberto Bolaño's *Between Parentheses* and *Distant Star*

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“LIKE ALL MEN, LIKE ALL LIVING THINGS ON EARTH, BORGES IS inexhaustible [*inagotable*]” (Bolaño 2011, 187/2008a, 174). This is how Roberto Bolaño opens a brief text from *Between Parentheses* that recounts, rewrites, and repeats Jorge Luis Borges’s short story “The Rose of Paracelsus.” Bolaño will go on to inform the reader that the version of the story that he will replicate is already a repetition, that the story included in his copy of *Shakespeare’s Memory* (Borges 1982) had been previously published elsewhere.¹ This is an important detail insofar as the miraculous repetition of something with no clear beginning or end is at the heart of the story itself.

In Borges’s story, a stranger visits the sixteenth-century occultist Paracelsus and promises to become a faithful disciple if Paracelsus will perform a miracle for him. The miracle entails reanimating a rose after it has been

burned to ashes by a hearth's fire. This request sparks a philosophical debate about the nature and problem of change. Paracelsus argues that something cannot be turned into nothing, that what exists cannot be absolutely destroyed, while the stranger insists that the rose can in fact be destroyed by fire. "If you cast this rose into the embers,' says Paracelsus, 'you would believe that it has been consumed, and that its ashes are real. I tell you that the rose is eternal, and that only its appearances may change. At a word from me, you would see it again'" (Bolaño 2011, 188). The stranger asks once more for a demonstration of this conversion process, but Paracelsus refuses, at which point the stranger tosses the rose into the fire, watches it burn to ashes, and waits for Paracelsus to revive it. This does not occur, however, and the stranger leaves disheartened. "Alone now," Bolaño writes, rewriting Borges, "Paracelsus scoops up the ashes and utters a single word in a low voice. And in his hands the rose springs back to life" (189).

Bolaño's retelling of the short story sheds some light on why Borges, along with all living things, is enigmatically described as *inagotable* or inexhaustible. Just as Paracelsus turns to language to restore the eternal rose, Bolaño's use of language renews the eternal Borges. The author of *Shakespeare's Memory*, who died just four years after the volume's publication, accordingly remains alive in and through the words of others, which are also Borges's own words rewritten, reworked, and reorganized, that is to say, translated. Indeed, Bolaño's essay is to be read as a meditation on Borges and translation that simultaneously performs a translation of Borges. In translation, Bolaño demonstrates by example, something lives on even as it changes its appearance, there is repetition but with difference, and life gives way not to death but to afterlife, or, even more radically, true life never gives way at all but rather inexhaustibly endures modifications, eternally becoming new versions or drafts of itself. In this way, Bolaño repeats one of Borges's central propositions on translation: the original is not a stable or "definitive" text but rather one of a potentially unending series of drafts or versions of the same "mutable fact [*hecho móvil*]" (Borges 2000, 69/1996, 239).²

To many of his readers, this Bolaño will likely sound very unfamiliar, since the author of works like *The Savage Detectives* and *2666* has often been read and interpreted as a melancholic leftist chronicling the tragic waves of

destruction that signal the defeat of political revolution in Latin America.³ Although Bolaño is typically associated with repetition, what returns again and again in his fictions is rarely life but death piled on top of more death. Brett Levinson, for example, writes: “It is noteworthy, in fact, that all violence in *2666* is serial. Each act of brutality is the repetition of other such acts in the text. . . . The accounts pile detail upon detail, name upon name, so as to materialize as an incomplete heap” (2009, 190).⁴ Bolaño is likewise typically read as a chronicler not of the inexhaustible but of the total exhaustion of modernity’s categories and promises, including the exhaustion of literature itself as a practice external to, rather than complicit with, everyday horror and violence. As Sergio Villalobos-Ruminott puts it, for Bolaño, “literature does not save but condemns us to be part of the very logic of global violence,” signaling the general “exhaustion of the [hope] in literature” (2009, 195).⁵

The aim of this article is not to dispute these pervasive interpretations of Bolaño but rather to approach the author with some of his less familiar concepts in mind—life, translation, the inexhaustible—to see what they might add to the now well-known picture of death, destruction, and exhaustion.⁶ I will first consider these notions and other related ones that contribute to Bolaño’s treatment of aesthetics and politics in the series of texts written between 1998 and 2003 and included in the previously cited volume *Between Parentheses (Entre paréntesis)* (2011/2008a). With certain key points from this discussion in mind, I will turn to Bolaño’s novel *Distant Star (Estrella distante)* (2004/1996a), an auto-rewriting or self-translation of the final story included in his *Nazi Literature in the Americas (La literatura nazi en América)* (2008b/1996b), and call for a rethinking of another commonly held view, namely, that the author’s literary universe blurs the aesthetics and politics of the Left and the Right to such an extent that these positions become nearly indistinguishable, each other’s uncanny double or Siamese twin.⁷ It will be my argument that reading *Distant Star* with *Between Parentheses* reveals a different operation, one that, instead of blurring distinctions, accomplishes the very opposite by drawing a line of demarcation within the Left itself. Attending to this scission, I maintain, makes possible a new reading of *Distant Star* as a novel of both left self-critique and the affirmation of a left alternative.

AESTHETICS AND POLITICS IN *BETWEEN PARENTHESES*, OR,
BOLAÑO BETWEEN BORGES AND PARRA

While Bolaño's retelling of Borges's "The Rose of Paracelsus" allegorically and performatively addresses the theme of translation, other texts from *Between Parentheses* are more explicit in their treatment of the topic. The essay "Translation is an Anvil," for example, begins by pondering what allows some texts to successfully travel across linguistic, spatial, and temporal boundaries while others, treasured in their original language, do not have the same impact in places where that language is not understood. Connecting repetition once more to life, Bolaño writes: "Why isn't [Francisco de] Quevedo a living poet, by which I mean a poet worthy of being reread and reinterpreted and imitated in spheres outside of Spanish literature?" (2011, 239). He then contrasts Quevedo's fate with the fate of Miguel de Cervantes:

Cervantes . . . is our greatest novelist. He's also the greatest novelist . . . in lands where Spanish isn't spoken and where the work of Cervantes can for the most part only be read in translation. The various translations may be good or they may not be, which hasn't prevented the essence of *Don Quixote* from being imprinted on or filtered into the imagination of thousands of readers, who don't care about the verbal riches or the rhythm or force of Cervantine prose, a prose that any translation, no matter how good, obviously distorts or dissolves. (239, 240)

Though Bolaño's choice of examples seems to rehearse the common trope that opposes the novel's translatability to poetry's untranslatability, this passage suggests a deeper contrast, for Cervantine prose is equally untranslatable and will be distorted no matter the quality of the translation. Yet, even after distortion, Bolaño asserts that something essential from *Don Quixote* endures, and it is that something that has an impact on the imagination of readers in places where Spanish is not understood. It is therefore not a question of the translatability of different genres of writing but rather of writing's capacity to survive translation.

This capacity distinguishes what Bolaño terms an "absolute masterpiece" from an "ordinary masterpiece," or a "living literature" that "belongs to all mankind" from "a literature that's only the heritage of a certain tribe" (240). If,

as the essay's title proposes, translation is an anvil upon which a text is stretched and reshaped, then the blaze of language's fire or the force of the translator's hammer can ruin an ordinary masterpiece. An absolute masterpiece, on the other hand, is capable of enduring even the most careless forging process. For this reason, Bolaño maintains that such a text, in translation and despite the inevitable distortion of translation, is ultimately accessible to everyone, that it is or can become the heritage of "all mankind."

In a characteristically subtle moment of humor, Bolaño reveals that his essay on translation is itself a translation, that everything that he is saying has been said before, that, "Borges, who wrote absolute masterpieces, explained it once already" (240). Bolaño then proceeds, yet again, to repeat or rewrite Borges, this time reforging a few lines from Borges's introduction to his Spanish translation of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*:

Here's the story: Borges goes to the theater to see a production of *Macbeth*. The translation is terrible, the production is terrible, the actors are terrible, the staging is terrible. Even the seats are uncomfortable. And yet when the lights go down and the play begins, the spectators, Borges among them, are immersed once again in the fate of characters who traverse time, shivering once again at what for lack of a better word we can call magic. (240)

Borges recalls this experience at the theater because he believes that the greatness of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*—like that of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*—will endure no matter the quality of the translation.⁸ The emphasis for Bolaño remains on what stays the same despite translation, on the "once again" and the traversal of time, but it should be noted that Bolaño's own translation of Borges regularly introduces new elements into previously existing texts. In this instance, Bolaño's translation of Borges's anecdote adds the term "magic" to describe none other than that quality of an absolute masterpiece that is impervious to change. "Magic" thus becomes the sign of both repetition and difference; it is the product of Bolaño's translation as well as the name Bolaño gives to that which inexhaustibly survives translation.

This suggests that translation does not function univocally in Bolaño's work but rather that it is, as a concept and practice, internally divided. It

would therefore be necessary to distinguish between *different modes* of translation. Consider, along these lines, Bolaño's discussion of translation as a litmus test for separating an absolute masterpiece from "its critical apparatus, its exegetes, its tireless plagiarizers, its belittlers" (241):

Let it be translated. Let its translator be far from brilliant. Rip pages from it at random. Leave it lying in an attic. If after all of this a kid comes along and reads it, and after reading makes it his own, and is faithful to it (or unfaithful, whichever) and reinterprets it and accompanies it on its voyage to the edge, and both are enriched and the kid adds an ounce of value to its original value, then we have something before us, a machine or a book, capable of speaking to all human beings. (241)

While referring to a form of translation that merely repeats a work (the exegetes, the plagiarizers) or detracts from it (the belittlers, those who "rip pages from it at random"), Bolaño also gestures toward an alternative mode of translation practiced by the youthful reader.⁹ Like Bolaño with Borges, the youthful reader reinterprets a work either faithfully or unfaithfully but in such a way that something valuable or meaningful is added to it, enriching the text at the same time that it enriches its interpreter-translator. Bolaño accordingly closes the essay at his most Borgesian, proposing, as Borges did on various occasions, that a translation, far from being necessarily inferior, can actually improve the original (which, in this case as for Borges in general, is itself already a translation or prior version of the same *hecho móvil*).¹⁰

Another essay from *Between Parentheses* entitled "The Book That Survives" continues to develop this alternative, Borgesian notion of translation. The book that survives is the book that is never forgotten, and, in Bolaño's case, Borges's *Obra poética* is unforgettable. This leads Bolaño to discuss the precursor of Borges's poetry, who is predictably Whitman, and the latter's influence on Latin American verse:

It is true that all American poets must . . . face up to Whitman. Unfailingly, [Pablo] Neruda does so as the obedient son. [César] Vallejo does so as the disobedient or prodigal son. Borges—and this is the source of his originality

and his cool head—does so as a nephew, and not even a very close one. . . . [a]nd yet Borges's poetry is the most Whitmanian of all. (200)

Each with their own particular style, Neruda, Vallejo, and Borges are depicted as translators of Whitman. Neruda is obediently faithful to the original, all repetition and no difference, whereas Vallejo disobediently diverges from the original but, like a good prodigal son, ultimately wanders back faithfully to the original source. Borges, on the other hand, is neither obedient nor disobedient but rather distant, related to the original but not directly a result of it, and it is this relationship with distance that allows for both inheritance and originality. The essay accordingly implies that survival is tied to a particular mode of translation, that the book that survives is an original translation. From a process that writing may not survive (unless the text is an absolute masterpiece), translation is here construed as a mode of writing that makes survival possible. For Bolaño, in other words, translation can act as both a destructive force and a life-giving force, and, in anticipation of my argument, these modes of translation are opposed yet also interrelated.

Although the themes considered up to this point might appear narrowly literary or a-political, what follows will demonstrate that the key terms for Bolaño's discussion of aesthetics harbor significant implications for politics. This is the case, for example, with the notion of survival. This term is expanded and explicitly politicized in an article that turns to the only literary referent as central to Bolaño's work as Borges: the Chilean poet Nicanor Parra.

A political note: Parra has managed to survive. It's not much, but it's something. He has survived the Chilean left, with its deeply right-wing convictions, and the memory-challenged, neo-Nazi Chilean right. He has survived the neo-Stalinist Latin American left and the Latin American right, now globalized and until recently the silent accomplice of repression and genocide. (101)

While not much, while not the same as a triumphant victory, Bolaño calls for the survival of survival or the renewed memory of Parra's survival before the memory-challenged Right and its right-wing counterpart on the Left. This renewal of life, the repetition in memory of survival, is contrasted with

another kind of repetition, the mindlessness or memory-lessness designated by the “neo-” prefix on both sides of the political spectrum, repeating Nazism and Stalinism, repression and genocide, in Chile, Latin America, and around the globe. Much like Bolaño’s attempt to describe an alternative mode of translation that renews rather than destroys, the above passage gestures toward an alternative Left that survives the reduction of all politics to death on the Right and death on the (right-wing) Left.

Though known for saying many critical things about literature, writers and readers of literature, and their complicity with the forces of death and destruction, Bolaño less famously argues that literature can resist these same forces and that it can contribute to the survival of its writers and readers. Recall Auxilio, the protagonist of Bolaño’s novel *Amulet*, who locks herself in a bathroom during the 1968 multiday military occupation of a Mexican university and passes the time by writing poetry on toilet paper. At one point in the narrative, she memorably states: “Because I wrote, I endured” (Bolaño 2006a, 175). As Chris Andrews (2014, 147) has noted, this statement is a translation, a breathing life into something already written, namely the final line of an Enrique Lihn poem that reads, “because I wrote I’m alive” (Lihn 1978, 101). With *Auxilio*, in other words, writing doubly preserves life, both the life of the writer and the life of the written.

In his discussion of Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*, Bolaño maintains that reading, like writing, can contribute to warding off death: “Survival. That’s one of the kinds of magic to be found here. The ability to survive. If [*Huckleberry Finn*] is read carefully and read at least ten times, some of this magic might come off the page and begin to flow through the veins of the person reading it” (2011, 293). Whereas magic previously named that aspect of an absolute masterpiece that survives translation, the aforementioned passage designates survival as itself a kind of magic. If Huck and Jim demonstrate their magical ability to survive while traveling the Mississippi River, Bolaño contends that the ability can be transferred to the careful rereader. When the reader keeps the book alive by rereading it, in other words, the book will do the same for the reader, keeping him or her alive through the transfer or translation of its magic. Writing in the wake of the seemingly endless torture and death of the

past century, Bolaño depicts reading as a matter of survival, and survival, although not much, as something magical.

“To the countless number of those killed by the repression one must add the suicide victims,” writes Bolaño in another essay from *Between Parentheses* (106). To survive accordingly entails not only withstanding torture and political persecution but also refusing the temptation of suicide. Bolaño turns once again to Twain for a lesson on survival in such conditions: “A more sensitive man would have killed himself, but Twain believed that suicide was redundant” (296). Put differently, in times of suicide’s redundancy, when death repeatedly piling on top of death becomes the norm, mere survival is an extraordinary form of resistance.

A related text entitled “The Women Readers of Winter” presents the act of reading as playing a role in surviving both political persecution and the temptation of suicide:

I think about the Russian women who fought the revolution and who endured Stalinism, which was worse than winter, and fascism, which was worse than hell, and they always had books with them, when suicide would have been the logical choice. In fact, many of those winter readers ended up killing themselves. But not all of them. (118)

The choice is between either reading or committing suicide, although many (but importantly *not all*) choose suicide after choosing to read. Reading is consequently not a guarantee of survival; however, as with Auxilio’s writing, because the women revolutionaries read, some of them endured. To read during the long winter of Stalinism and the hell of fascism is to refuse to add another life to the death toll. The women revolutionaries who survive symbolically embody, like Parra, a resistant alternative to both the Right and the right-wing Left.

While Bolaño links translation to survival as well, its political reach does not end there. In another essay from *Between Parentheses*, Bolaño develops his position on the politics of translation through a close reading of a stanza from one of Parra’s poems:

Chile's four great poets
are three:

Alonso de Ercilla and Rubén Darío. (43)

As some readers will notice, these are not the usual names associated with Chilean letters (e.g., Gabriela Mistral, Vicente Huidobro, Pablo de Rokha, Pablo Neruda). Rather, Parra highlights the sixteenth-century Spanish soldier Ercilla, who wrote a famous book of epic poetry after participating in the colonial wars against the Mapuche Indians, and the Nicaraguan poet Darío, who wrote poetry while living in Chile toward the end of the nineteenth century.

Bolaño will go on to point out that Parra's poem is a rewriting or translation of one of Huidobro's most famous verses:

The four cardinal points
Are three
South and north. (44)

While Bolaño likes the original, he prefers, in good Borgesian fashion, Parra's translation, the latter's "variation/spoof" (44). Bolaño explains: "It's like an explosive device set there to open our eyes and shake the nonsense out of us Chileans . . . and although at first glance it seems like a joke, and it actually *is* a joke, at second glance it's revealed to be a declaration of human rights" (44; emphasis in original). The joke, of course, is that Parra translates the Chilean poet Huidobro, a kind of homage to the *creacionista*, only to exclude him from the list of Chile's great poets, opting instead for writers who—and this is what gives the poem its explosive quality—spent time in Chile but were born and died elsewhere. Parra's poem thus "teaches us that nationalism is wretched and collapses under its own weight" (45), that only nationalist chauvinism would disallow Ercilla and Darío from being considered Chile's great poets while hailing other poets in their stead purely on the basis of nationality.

It is important to note that Bolaño underscores the political performativity of Parra's translation: it is an *explosive device* that opens eyes and shakes out nonsense, and it is a *declaration* that enacts certain human rights that are not restricted to the nation and are opposed to nationalism. Translation, for

Bolaño, is therefore not only an aesthetic practice that extends the life of a work, improves an original, or distinguishes an absolute masterpiece from an ordinary one. Translation also functions as a form of political intervention, a practice with potentially transformative effects.

The key to appreciating Bolaño's position on the politics of translation, Parra is also central for sketching out Bolaño's understanding of what I have referred to as a left alternative to both the Right and the right-wing Left. This becomes clear in one of Bolaño's most important essays from the collection, whose title, "A Modest Proposal," appropriately alludes to Jonathan Swift's (1996) work of political satire. While Bolaño's essay acknowledges that "the left [has] committed an infinity of crimes, by commission or omission," it also asserts that the requirement to "intone a permanent *mea culpa* for the Stalinist concentration camps is from any point of view an excessive demand" (2011, 89). Bolaño is not suggesting, of course, that past crimes done in the name of the Left should be ignored or forgotten. He is likewise not inhabiting a position of political purity before the crimes of the past, a position that would exemplify the good conscience of Hegel's "beautiful soul," whose "inner beauty is merely inversely proportionate to the sordidness that it projects onto the outside world" (Bosteels 2011, 144).¹¹ Bolaño's point, rather, is to unapologetically critique the reduction of all politics to repentant leftism, to the left melancholia that Wendy Brown describes as "caught in a structure of melancholic attachment to a certain strain of its own dead past, . . . whose structure of desire is backward looking and punishing" (2003, 464).

Bolaño accordingly maintains that critique should not be one-sided, that "*all* politicians, . . . those on the left and those on the right and those in the center" (2011, 90; emphasis in original), should recognize their role in the injustices of the past century. This leads Bolaño to advance his modest proposal:

It wouldn't be a bad thing, or at least not the worst thing, to enter the third millennium asking for forgiveness right and left, and in the meantime, while we're at it, we should raise a statue of Nicanor Parra in Plaza Italia, a statue of Nicanor and another of Neruda, but with their backs turned to each other. At this point, I foresee that more than one alleged reader will say to himself . . . :

Bolaño says Parra is the poet of the right and Neruda is the poet of the left.
Some people don't know how to read. (90, 91)

The satirical proposal to erect statues of Parra and Neruda should not be read as yet another melancholic memorialization of the crimes of the Right and the Left. Rather, both statues must be considered from within the Left, as marking, with turned backs, an antagonistic scission inside the Left itself. Bolaño's modest proposal, in other words, calls for a critique of the dead past of Stalinism (symbolized by Neruda, whose Stalinist sympathies were well known)¹² as well as a recovery of another past, a living past that is not beautifully pure of the crimes of the last century but that nevertheless continues to stand as a left alternative—embodied by Parra—to right-wing leftism.

Bolaño's mapping of an internal division within the Left is a crucial point developed in *Between Parentheses*. A thorough examination of the volume also reveals the extent to which Bolaño connects practices of reading, writing, and translation to an aesthetics and politics that responds to the repetition of death and the redundancy of suicide with another kind of repetition, that of survival and the inexhaustible renewal of life. The line that divides these two forms of repetition is therefore not the line that demarcates the Left from the Right but rather the line that demarcates the Right *and* the right-wing Left from a left alternative. These key points should be kept in mind when reading Bolaño's work in general and, as I will argue below, *Distant Star* in particular.

EXPLODING THE MIRROR OF *DISTANT STAR*, OR,
SELF-CRITIQUE AND AFFIRMATION

Distant Star's opening note informs the reader that the novel is an expanded rewriting of the final chapter from Bolaño's hybrid encyclopedia/short-story collection, *Nazi Literature in the Americas*. The fictitious Arturo B. is said to have first shared with Bolaño the story of the chapter's protagonist, the infamous (and equally fictitious) Ramírez Hoffman, who is both an avant-garde poet and a right-wing lieutenant that participates in the torture and killing of many left-wing poets and students during Chile's 1973 military coup. According to Bolaño, the decision to repeat in expanded form his previous

text stems from Arturo “not [being] satisfied with my version” (2004, 1). He continues:

Arturo would have preferred a longer story that, rather than mirror or explode others, would be, in itself, a mirror and explosion. So we took that final chapter and . . . composed the present novel. My role was limited to preparing refreshments, consulting a few books, and discussing the reuse of numerous paragraphs with Arturo and the increasingly animated ghost [*el fantasma cada día más vivo*] of Pierre Menard. (1996a, 11)

This passage asks to be read as a succession of allusions to Borges, translation, and Borges on translation. The book is framed as a new draft seeking to improve the original, yet the original is itself a translation, a version of someone else’s story (Arturo’s). The title of Bolaño’s initial version of the story, “The *Infamous* Ramírez Hoffman” (2008b), moreover implies, as Bolaño confirms in an interview (2006b, 42), that *Nazi Literature in the Americas* is a translation of Borges’s *A Universal History of Infamy* (2004), a collection of stories about infamous bad guys and pirates.¹³ To add yet another level of repetition to the series, Borges explains in his own opening note to the book that *A Universal History of Infamy*, rather than a collection of original stories, is actually composed of a number of texts that “chang[e] and distort . . . the stories of other men” (4).¹⁴ To summarize, this chain of references construes *Distant Star* as a translation of a translation included in a book that translates a collection of translations (that can likely also be read as translations of other texts, ad infinitum).

Bolaño appropriately invokes the ghost of Pierre Menard, the protagonist of Borges’s famous short story “Pierre Menard, Author of *Don Quixote*,” which can be read as a parable on translation loosely based on the Nietzschean idea of eternal return.¹⁵ Recall that in Borges’s story Menard does not attempt to write another, modernized *Don Quixote* but rather *the Don Quixote*. The narrator maintains that this would amount to miraculously producing “pages [that] would coincide—word for word and line for line—with those of Miguel de Cervantes” (Borges 1962, 49). Bolaño’s *Distant Star* likewise repeats the same story, reusing passages that coincide word for word and line for line with the final chapter of *Nazi Literature in the Americas*. With every repetition of a

passage, the life of the story is renewed, like the increasingly more alive (*más vivo*) Menard. As the narrator of Borges's story suggests, repetition can also be "renovation" (55) insofar as every repetition is a *different* iteration that takes place in a *different* context, altering in this way what is repeated. The same *Don Quixote* is made unfamiliar —is not the same—if read as though its author were a twentieth-century Frenchman writing in an anachronistic variation of a foreign language rather than a sixteenth-century Spaniard using the language of his time and place. Arturo would likewise prefer that the story of Ramírez Hoffman be different, that in its repetition, rather than mirror or explode the counterpart stories of *Nazi Literature in the Americas*, it would be, in itself, a mirror and an explosion.

As the reader will recall, this is not the first time that Bolaño describes translation as resulting in an explosion. Parra's humorous translation of Huidobro's poem is similarly described as an explosive device due to its capacity to function as a form of political intervention that shakes the nationalist nonsense out of its Chilean readers. To grasp what kind of political lessons the explosiveness of Bolaño's self-translation might provide, it would be helpful to meditate on the notion that *Distant Star*, as an explosion, is also meant to be a mirror, that object that confronts the subject with an image that both is and is not itself, a kind of visual translation of that which stands before it. With this in mind, note how Bolaño describes his choice of subject matter in an interview on *Nazi Literature in the Americas* (and consequently also *Distant Star*): "I pick the world of the ultra-right, but much of the time, in reality, I am talking about the left. I pick the easiest image to caricature in order to talk about something else" (Bolaño 2006b, 111, 112; my translation). If *Distant Star* is a mirror, its tale of the ultra-Right is a reflection of the Left, the latter's mirror image. This would suggest that the political intervention of the novel, its explosion, is aimed at the nonsense of the Left, that *Distant Star* can be read as a series of critiques of the Left from within the Left.¹⁶

It is worth noting in this regard that the novel's protagonist, Carlos Wieder, *Distant Star's* repetition with difference of the infamous Ramírez Hoffman, mirrors the novel's own aesthetics of translation. To fully appreciate their parallel structure, consider Wieder's first performance piece, which the narrator, a leftist student and poet, observes from a prison yard where he and others are being held

after the military coup. Gazing up at the sky, the prisoners watch as Wieder uses the smoke emitting from his aircraft to write a poem in Latin that repeats and reuses famous lines from the Book of Genesis. The response is one of general confusion, but one prisoner, *el loco* Norberto, claims to understand the significance of the poem-performance. He exclaims: "It's a Messerschmitt 109, a Messerschmitt fighter, . . . the best fighter plane of 1940! . . . The Second World War is returning to the Earth. All the talk about the Third World War was wrong; it's the Second returning, returning, returning" (Bolaño 2004, 26).

With this passage, Menard's ghost returns alongside the Second World War, as well as the Nietzschean idea of eternal return, inevitably returning the reader to the novel's opening note. Although the Latin words are not translated into Spanish, Wieder's is an aesthetics of translation that mobilizes a differential use of citation and repetition paralleling in many ways the aesthetics of *Distant Star*. Accordingly, while Bolaño's translation of his story transforms the text into a novel-length mirror, one of the images that can be seen in this mirror, Wieder's sky poetry, is a reflection of the novel's own mode of writing, a translation of its own practice of translation. Bolaño's self-translation ultimately reflects back at itself; Bolaño places the mirror opposite to him, to his right, to examine his own position on the Left.

This mirroring raises a pair of questions that require further reflection: (1) Can the same aesthetics of translation be utilized by the Left and the Right, or are these opposing political positions in part demarcated by opposing forms of translation? (2) Does the shared aesthetics of translation point to a broader collapse of the distinction between the Left and the Right, or does the novel-mirror also reflect the image of an alternative Left, as found in *Between Parentheses*? To begin to answer these questions, I would underline how Bolaño describes Menard as more and more alive with the increasing reuse of previously written passages. Echoing the above discussion, this frames translation as a practice that gives life through repetition, that is in itself the repetition of life (*cada día más vivo*). Wieder's translation, on the other hand, brings with it the return of the Second World War, a repetition that results in more death rather than more life, in the apparition of neo-Nazis rather than Menard.¹⁷

This important distinction suggests that, for Bolaño, translation is not a neutral aesthetic practice that can be equally instrumentalized by the Right

and by the Left. On the contrary, different modes of translation—as regenerative or destructive—demarcate opposing political positions. This difference that distinguishes the repetition of translation furthermore indicates how Bolaño’s opening note subtly reflects a position that is not reducible to the mirror image of the Right, what in *Between Parentheses* is referred to as the neo-Stalinist or right-wing Left. In other words, as a self-critical novel, *Distant Star* will also provide occasional glimpses of affirmation, of a life-affirming left alternative. I will develop this point toward the end of my argument after a necessary detour through the novel’s various moments of critique.

Because Bolaño discusses the Left through its mirror image caricature on the ultra-Right, it will be helpful to examine more closely the development of the novel’s fascist protagonist. The etymology of Wieder’s name, as presented by the narrator’s friend and fellow leftist poet Bibiano O’Ryan, is instructive in this regard: “*Wieder*, Bibiano inform us, meant ‘once more,’ ‘again,’ ‘a second time,’ and in some contexts ‘over and over’; or ‘the next time,’ in sentences referring to future events” (40). *Wider*, an older variation of Wieder’s name, also “means ‘against,’ ‘contrary to,’ and sometimes ‘in opposition to’” (41). The reincarnation of Ramírez Hoffman, Wieder names, literally, the repetition of the Right, the rise of fascism once more, in opposition to left poets like Bibiano and the narrator.

Wieder’s other major aerial performance correspondingly reveals, as suggested above, that the second coming of the Second World War will bring with it another cycle of death. Over the sky of Chile’s capital, Wieder writes a series of phrases that begin with “Death is” and end with words such as “friendship,” “Chile,” “responsibility,” “love,” “growth,” “communion,” “cleansing,” and “my heart” (80–82). Although Wieder runs out of smoke, seemingly forcing his repetitive poem on death to come to its own end, he writes another phrase: “Death is resurrection” (82). The poem’s final metaphor is a kind of paradox that the poem itself performs through its repetitive structure. Death *is* resurrection, which is to say that death is not the end, that it can be repeated over and over, and that this repetition of death sustains the repetition and reemergence of the Right.

Franklin Rodríguez (2010, 211) has perceptively noted that the dual meaning of Wieder’s name, “again” and “against,” parallels the motif of the novel as

mirror and explosion. Many commentators (Williams 2009, 133–35; O’Brien 2011, 479, 480; Hoyos 2015, 50) have similarly noted that Wieder’s aerial poem on death can be read as a translation and critique (or mirroring and explosion) of Chilean leftist writer Raúl Zurita’s aerial poem that appeared over the skies of New York City in 1982.¹⁸ Entitled “The New Life,” the poem is composed of a series of phrases that begin with “My God Is” and end with words such as “Hunger,” “Snow,” “Emptiness,” “Wound,” “Ghetto,” and “Pain” (Zurita 1986, 1). Read together, Wieder’s poem looks much like the inverted mirror image of Zurita’s, reflecting death back at the new life of afterlife, positive nouns back at negative ones, and the Right back at the Left.

There is nevertheless one element common to Zurita’s poem and both of Wieder’s poems, namely, their use of religious imagery, and this is precisely where Bolaño aims his critique of Zurita. When asked in an interview how he views the poet’s work, Bolaño responds: “Zurita seems absolutely messianic to me. In his references to God, to the resurrection of Chile. . . . Poetically this is very seductive, but for me the truth is that I do not believe in those eschatologies” (Bolaño 2006b, 113; my translation). Bolaño also writes in an essay suggestively titled “Chilean Poetry under Inclement Skies” that “Zurita creates a wonderful body of work . . . but his eschatology and messianism are also the pillars of a mausoleum or a funeral pyre toward which almost all the poets of Chile marched in the 1980s” (2011, 96). The final line of Wieder’s poem could thus be interpreted as the mirror-image inversion of Bolaño’s critique of Zurita. For Bolaño, resurrection *is* death, the promise of a new life after death is a dead end, the messianism of Chilean leftist poetry marches toward the mausoleum. This is the first kind of nonsense that Bolaño’s translation seeks to explosively shake out of the Left, its propensity to frame the history of Chile’s military coup and its aftermath within a redemptive eschatology. In anticipation of my argument, the implied alternative to death and resurrection, recalling the above discussion of *Between Parentheses*, is survival and the inexhaustibility of life.

Distant Star’s left critique also reaches further (and further back) than the messianism of Zurita and his counterparts in the 1980s. The Left of the prior decade, the Left of the military dictatorship that included among its ranks a young Bolaño,¹⁹ is also scrutinized in the mirror. It is important to recall that Bolaño

does not construe the Left of this period as purely innocent, because it also committed crimes “by omission or commission.” To address the crimes of omission, the novel focuses on the theme of silence. This is the case, for instance, when a pair of “surrealist reporters” attend the private opening of Wieder’s photography exhibit with the intent of reporting on the event, unaware that what they will see, a series of photographs of Wieder’s dead victims and other violent images, is not meant for civilian eyes (Bolaño 2004, 86). When questioned by a military official on their way out, the surrealist reporters “affirm[ed] that, as far as they were concerned, nothing had happened in the flat that night” (91). Wieder’s photographic reproduction of his victims points once more to a form of translation that contributes to the repetition of death and destruction. Although it would be tempting to read the silence of the surrealist reporters as marking the end of this repetition, insofar as they do not reproduce their experience in writing, silence is actually repetition by omission, the tacit acceptance of more torture and death. This scene is accordingly an indictment of any leftist reporters or avant-garde artists who chose complicity and inaction before evidence of the military dictatorship’s widespread violence and murder.²⁰

Another, more complicated discussion of silence takes place when Wieder, after returning from a skywriting journey to Antarctica, tells journalists that “the most dangerous thing [of the trip] had been the silence” (45). The description continues:

Silence is like leprosy, declared Wieder; silence is like communism; silence is like a blank screen that must be filled. If you fill it, nothing bad can happen to you. If you are pure, nothing bad can happen to you. If you are not afraid, nothing bad can happen to you. According to Bibiano, [Wieder] was describing an angel, . . . the angel of our misfortune. (45)

As though to emphasize the Left’s incapacity to speak up, its explosive self-critique can only be articulated by the Right, in Wieder’s voice. It is ironically the fascist who declares that silence can have dangerous effects, such as allowing fascism to persist unchallenged. The key simile of the passage—silence is like communism—could therefore be interpreted as yet another

inverted mirror image, which, if flipped and slightly modified, would reveal the actual message, that communists have been silent, that the Left's silence is dangerous.

Wieder's prescription seems straightforward. Like a good leftist, he calls for ending the void of silence by filling it up, by speaking out in protest, perhaps through the press or avant-garde art. Nonetheless, what follows, particularly the reference to purity as an angel of "our [the Left's] misfortune," hints at a more complicated position. In my reading, this scene offers a subtle critique not just of the Left's silence but also of its attempt, when it does speak out, to construe itself in the image of the beautiful soul, that angelic creature that understands itself as internally pure from the crimes of the world and consequently in no way implicated in them. This critique could be extended to any kind of leftist writing, from journalism to poetry, that is presented as a pure outside, autonomous from, rather than "co-belonging" with, the horrors it denounces (Villalobos-Ruminott 2009, 195).²¹ In sum, along with the Left's propensity for redemptive eschatology, *Distant Star* offers an explosive critique of the Left's complicit silence, aiming, at the same time, to shake any beautiful soul nonsense out of the Left's self-understanding.

To depict the ultra-Right as the Left's mirror image implies, as some commentators have noted (López-Vicuña 2009, 159; Rodríguez 2010, 212), that these political positions are not actually that different but rather uncanny doubles of each other. The novel develops this idea principally through the imagery of Siamese twins. Identical yet different, separate yet conjoined, a world of solely Siamese twins forms the setting of a short play Wieder writes after disappearing from Chile the day after his photography exhibit. In this fictional world, "each character devotes himself to torturing his Siamese twin for a certain period (a cycle, in the author's words), after which the tortured becomes the torturer and vice versa" (Bolaño 2004, 95). This same imagery (cyclically) returns when Abel Romero, a detective turned bounty hunter, commissions the narrator to help him track down Wieder. After some investigative work, they travel to a suburb of Barcelona where Wieder has been hiding. The narrator goes to a local café that Wieder frequents and waits for the infamous murderer to arrive. When Wieder finally comes through the

door and sits down at a nearby table, the narrator relates that “for a nauseating moment I could see myself almost joined to him, like a vile Siamese twin” (144). The narrator’s sickening discovery is that, like in Wieder’s play, the roles have been reversed or mirrored, and a new cycle is under way, one in which the formerly hunted hunts the hunter.

After spotting Wieder, the narrator meets up with Romero: “Is it him? asked Romero. Yes, I said. Are you certain? I’m certain. I was going to say something more, launch into ethical and aesthetic reflections on the passing of time . . . but Romero quickened his pace. He has a job to do, I thought. *We* have a job to do, I realized, horrified” (146; emphasis in original). Tempted to stop Romero from completing the job, perhaps by appealing to the notion that a person can change over time, the narrator instead chooses silence and inaction. Although he does not accompany Romero, and the latter’s encounter with Wieder is not narrated, the reader is to assume that Wieder has been killed and that the narrator is an accomplice, by commission and omission, to murder. The final act of violence, although it happens—much like the violence of the dictatorship—behind closed doors, ends the novel and the seemingly endless cycles of violence described therein.

Although the bad guy is finally dead, the book does not conclude with a sense of victorious resolution. It feels, instead, much like an “anticlimax” (1), the word used to describe the text’s precursor in *Nazi Literature in the Americas*. As Gareth Williams contends, the narrator’s final “recognition of enmity,” of Wieder qua enemy, “produces a horizon of retributive justice that is little more than calculated revenge, melancholic guilt and anxiety, or a combination of both” (2009, 132). It reduces, moreover, “the democratic/revolutionary horizon of collective politics . . . to the utmost individualism of identifying one’s former enemy, and nothing else” (132).

Williams critiques *Distant Star* for this reduction of politics to individualistic and melancholic revenge, and I would propose that the novel can be read as inviting such a criticism, that the closing scene can be understood as the last of a series of explosive self-critiques of the Left. The narrator not only recognizes the enemy but also recognizes the enemy as part of himself, as his conjoined twin. Accordingly, the imagery of Siamese twins explodes its own mirror structure, showing the Left to be the repe-

tition with only nominal difference of the Right, explosively revealing that the Left is right-wing in its actions and inaction.

Yet, as seen in both *Between Parentheses* and the opening note of *Distant Star*, Bolaño does not collapse the distinction between the Left and the Right, turning two into one, but rather introduces another distinction within the Left, turning one into two. As I have demonstrated above, much of *Distant Star* focuses on one side of this scission as a form of left self-critique. At this point, however, I would like to turn to an often-overlooked scene in the novel that gestures, albeit opaquely, toward the other, more affirmative side of the scission, the side that stands as an alternative to the repetition of death, right and (right-wing) left.

The scene that I have in mind revolves around a minor character named Petra, a young, gay Chilean artist growing up during the dictatorship whose arms are amputated after he severely injures himself playing as a child. For his appearance, his sexuality, and his social status, he endures hardships throughout his life and eventually decides to drown himself in the sea. The narrator recounts that after jumping into the water,

an involuntary movement of his legs sent him back up to the surface. . . . Then he went under again. . . . Suddenly drawing courage from nowhere, he decided he was not going to die. Now or never, he thought, and began to swim back up. . . . In the current sociopolitical climate, he said to himself, committing suicide is absurd and redundant. Better to become an undercover poet. (Bolaño 2004, 73)

Petra faces a familiar choice, the choice of suicide or literature, death or writing, drowning or poetry. Like Bolaño's Twain, he recognizes the redundancy of suicide when faced with the repetition of his own death piling on top of death. He therefore chooses poetry, which is not absolutely autonomous from the horrors of his time but nevertheless functions as an alternative to their ceaseless repetition. To write is to defy death, to swim to the surface, to breath more life into the living, to survive. Paraphrasing Auxilio, because Petra writes poetry, he endures.

The name designated for the choice of survival and writing is appropriately "courage," another famous Borgesian motif that survives in Bolaño's

reworking of it.²² In a moment of seeming exhaustion, it is Petra's courage that makes him, like Borges, like all living things, inexhaustible. It is important to underscore, moreover, that Petra tries to kill himself *twice* and saves himself *twice*. The theme of repetition returns and bifurcates as one form of repetition leads toward life and the surface and another toward death and the depths of the sea. Petra symbolically embodies the two modes of translation discussed throughout this article and consequently the two political positions to which they correspond. He is the one that is divided into two, like the Left, but his decision to resist the current state of things leads him to ultimately affirm the repetition of life.

Although Petra functions in the novel as a kind of symbol for courageous resistance and survival in times of suicide's redundancy, the reader is informed that he eventually dies of AIDS (76). It would be easy to focus exclusively on this detail and situate Petra's death among the multitudes of deaths to which Bolaño's writing melancholically returns again and again; however, I would propose an alternative interpretation that would construe Petra once more as the embodiment of an alternative to the nonsense of the Left, particularly that of Zurita and his counterparts. With Petra, there is no messianic promise of a new life in the afterlife or of life after death. The promise, rather, is to courageously struggle to survive in this life, until the end. Like Parra's story, Petra's is one of survival, which is neither a triumphant victory nor an anticlimax, but it is something.

It is this "something" that must be added to the usual picture of *Distant Star*. But the implications of this addition are potentially more far-reaching than just the novel, as it complicates the general interpretation of Bolaño as a melancholic leftist returning only to death, destruction, exhaustion, and the failure of the Left to be anything more than the Siamese twin of the Right. A close reading of *Distant Star* alongside *Between Parentheses* reveals, in fact, that Bolaño is equally concerned with the repetition of life, the magic of survival, the courage of the inexhaustible, and the affirmation of a left alternative. What remains to be seen is how this unfamiliar Bolaño might make unfamiliar his many other familiar works, producing new versions or translations that repeat the same story differently.



NOTES

An early version of this article was presented as part of a panel entitled “Roberto Bolaño: Beyond Exhaustion” at the 2016 Annual Convention of the Modern Language Association in Austin, Texas. I thank Kate Jenckes for the kind invitation to participate in the panel and extend my gratitude to her and the other participants and members of the audience for their thoughtful interventions. I would also like to acknowledge Anna Fisher, Ana Sabau, and Antoine Traisnel for their moral and intellectual support during the writing of this article. The University of Michigan’s ADVANCE Faculty Summer Writing Grant Program provided financial support as well.

1. Bolaño is likely referring to the story’s publication five years prior to *La memoria de Shakespeare* (Borges 1982) in *Rosa y azul* (Borges 1977).
2. It should be noted that this article does not seek to offer an overview of Borges on translation in general but rather refers solely to the aspects of his work that are relevant for Bolaño’s own experimentation with translation as a concept and a practice. A separate essay might explore when and how Borges’s positions on translation diverge from those held by Bolaño.
3. See, for example, Gareth Williams’s (2009) diagnosis of Bolaño’s melancholic leftism and its limits. Carlos Franz (2008) and Ignacio López-Calvo (2015) have likewise examined the politics of Bolaño’s melancholia. Jean Franco similarly describes Bolaño as a “romantic anarchist” (2009, 216) that can only depict his generation’s legacy under the sign of tragedy.
4. Edmundo Paz Soldán (2008) discusses the apocalyptic imagination of Bolaño in similar terms.
5. Emilio Sauri analogously argues that modernist literary form “reaches a point of exhaustion” (2010, 414) in *The Savage Detectives*, whereas Patrick Dove extends Bolaño’s “announcement or performance of . . . exhaustion” (2016, 254) to modernity itself.
6. Susana Draper’s (2012) important rereading of Bolaño’s novel *Amulet* deeply resonates with my own approach, as she argues that the text is a meditation on potentiality rather than defeat, focused less on what happened than on what did *not* happen and therefore what *could* happen in a time to come. See also Rory O’Bryen’s meditation on Bolaño and literature beyond the “cynical view that literary culture will always pay lip-service to the machinations of state power” (2011, 485).
7. Ignacio López-Vicuña argues, for instance, that “[*Distant Star*] conveys the unease produced by the inability to clearly distinguish between good and evil, between right and left, between civilization and barbarism” (2009, 159). Franklin Rodríguez likewise contends that *Distant Star* “shroud[s] the categories of good and evil, left and right, progressive and conservative with ambiguity through the deployment of doublings” (2010, 212).

8. Borges's introduction reads: "I recall having attended, many years ago, a performance of *Macbeth*; the translation was every bit as shaky as the actors and the paint-caked set, but I went out onto the street shattered by tragic passion. Shakespeare had come through, and so will Whitman" (2000, 449).
9. Bolaño's discussion of the youthful reader could be read as an oblique allusion to or translation of Julio Cortázar's "reader-accomplice," the active reader described throughout the famous novel *Hopscotch* (1966). For a brief discussion of Cortázar's influence on Bolaño, see Paz Soldan's introduction to the edited volume *Bolaño salvaje* (2008).
10. Sergio Waisman offers an overview of Borges's thinking on the capacity of translation to improve the original in his book *Borges and Translation: The Irreverence of the Periphery* (2005, 65–76).
11. See Hegel's discussion of the beautiful soul in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1977, 383–409).
12. See, for instance, Adam Feinstein's (2006) biographical account of Neruda's ties to Stalinism.
13. Bolaño in fact explicitly includes Borges's *Universal History of Infamy* among the works that make up the "genealogy of Nazi Literature in the Americas" (2006b, 42; my translation).
14. Although Andrew Hurley translates *infamia* as "iniquity," rendering the book's title *A Universal History of Iniquity*, the English cognate "infamy" better preserves Bolaño's allusion to the work through the *infamous* Ramírez Hoffman.
15. Jacques Derrida (1988, 100), for example, famously discusses the implications of Borges's story for theorizing (the impossibility of) translation. David E. Johnson (2012, 45–47) and Sergio Waisman (2005, 84–123) elaborate on Derrida's remarks in their own treatment of Borges on translation. While Borges explicitly alludes to Nietzsche in his story as an influence on the fictitious Menard (1962, 52), Kate Jenckes (2008, 131–35) has explored the ambivalence that Borges feels toward Nietzsche in general and the Nietzschean idea of eternal return in particular.
16. In his discussion of *Distant Star* as a mirror and explosion, Rodríguez likewise suggests that "the concept of doubling is connected to self-criticism" (2010, 204) and points specifically to the "evaluation of [the narrator's] inaction during common traumatic experience" (212) as the main target of critique. I expand upon this reading of inaction by focusing on moments in the novel that do not appear in Rodríguez's analysis, yet my aim is also to significantly widen the target of self-critique beyond merely inaction.
17. On this point, I depart from Rory O'Bryen's (2015, 31) attempt to collapse the distinction between Menard and Wieder.
18. For the aforementioned critics, Wieder reveals how Chile's leftist avant-garde unwittingly mirrors the politics of the dictatorship, from the crisis of representation to the normalization of rupture and shock. I propose an alternative interpretation by focusing on how Bolaño explicitly describes Zurita and Zurita's poetry in texts that the critical literature on Bolaño oftentimes ignores.
19. As Bolaño writes in one autobiographical text, "I returned to Chile when I was twenty to take part in the Revolution, with such bad luck that a few days after I got to Santiago the coup came and the army seized power" (2011, 53).

20. Bolaño describes one such scene of silence and inaction in *Between Parentheses* (2011, 82, 83), recounting how Chilean writers would frequently gather at a home whose basement was used at the very same time to interrogate and torture dissidents.
21. While generally in agreement that there is a structural relationship of co-belonging between literature and horror for Bolaño, this essay maintains that such a relationship does not preclude contradiction, which is to say the potential for literature to play a role in opposing its own structural position.
22. See Andrews' (2014, 124–48, 178–89) discussion of Borges and Bolaño on courage. I thank Luis Othoniel Rosa for encouraging me to reflect further on the Borgesian undertones of Bolaño's discussion of courage.

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