

The Fantasy of Subaltern Literature in Bolaño and Elizondo

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I don't know whether you're a detective
or a pervert. —*Blue Velvet*

In the climactic scene of “Dentista” (*Putas asesinas* [2001]) by Roberto Bolaño the narrator follows his friend the dentist to a squalid (yet heavily aestheticized) shack on the outskirts of a Mexican city in order to read short stories by an unpublished indigenous/mestizo adolescent who lives there. Upon entering the ruinous the artist’s dwelling he describes the following: “El dentista me miró. Sus ojos brillaron de excitación. En aquel instante me pareció indigno lo que estábamos haciendo: un pasatiempo nocturno sin otra finalidad que la contemplación de la desgracia. La ajena y la propia, reflexioné” (385). Although the medical practitioner is ostensibly there to read literature, the excitement (“excitación”) in his eyes suggests a sexual arousal provoked by a situation in which he and the narrator have departed from their upper-middle-class habitat, and entered into a firsthand experience of the poverty of the margin. The narrator not only suggests that the desire to witness this other world arouses an erotic feeling that is, at the very least, inappropriate, but also that by merely

having contemplated the possibility of this secret intention, the “desgracia” of the surroundings has been reflected in the protagonists themselves. The refined taste of the literary connoisseur mingles with a voyeuristic desire to witness something horrible, and the obscenity of the margin turns out to be the critic’s own reflection.

With “Dentista” Bolaño rewrites Salvador Elizondo’s short story “Narda o el verano” (*Narda o el verano* [1966]) in order to reflect on an ongoing desire within and beyond the academy for literature after the “exhaustion of aesthetic and political possibility afforded by the literary” (Sauri 422). Through this act of rewriting Elizondo’s work—what I read as a reflection on ideological repetition—Bolaño elaborates a fantasy of a subaltern literature that is an imagined synthesis of literary and testimonial genres. Insofar as this desire for the subaltern is inflected by the end of literature in “Dentista,” the repetition it carries out can also be read as a commentary on cultural and subaltern studies, which were themselves formulated with a view on the end of literature. Bolaño recognizes that a well-intentioned impulse to learn the truth about the Other that defines the work of the detective and the scholar cannot escape the shadow of a perverse and voyeuristic desire to be redeemed by the Other’s suffering. As such, “Dentista” observes not only the exhaustion of literature but of cultural and subaltern studies as well. But while others have taken this exhaustion as the end of a particular line of thought, Bolaño marks it as a beginning. The new starting point for literary and cultural studies, and their ongoing potential for thought, lies in pursuing a deeper understanding of the perverse desire that undergirds their dialectical relationship. In Bolaño, ideology and the repetition it brings about become a form of knowledge in and of themselves.

The Progressive Disciplinary Fantasies of Literary and Cultural Studies

“Dentista” suggests that the will to truth historically connected to progressive ideals masks something less seemly. The dentist represents various valences of a discourse of progress, and his corruption must be understood as applying to each of them. He is a medical practitioner representing the scientific discourse that seeks to improve the lot of mankind through the application of empirical knowledge.¹ He is also a member of the Left, embodying a belief that the social sphere can be perfected

¹ The detective is another crucial figure of this scientific will to truth in Bolaño’s work, and features prominently in *La literatura nazi de América* (1993) and *Los detectives salvajes* (1998) in particular. Both the medical practitioner and the dentist represent not only scientific discourses, but also the disciplinarity of the carceral system that transforms “the economy of visibility into the exercise of power” (Foucault 187).

through community action and forward-looking change, which he puts into practice by volunteering at a clinic serving the indigent population of Irapuato when not working at his own practice. Finally, he is a literature aficionado, invoking the beliefs of a lettered, romantic scholarly tradition. Through its titular character, “Dentista” not only weighs in on the progressive values that inform hard science, but more generally, the “arts and sciences” of a humanistic education and the progressive political ideals often associated with the university.

Bolaño brings this questioning of the ideals that ostensibly motivate the discourse of higher education to bear directly on a question of *testimonio* and literature that prevailed for a time in Latin American literary and cultural studies, an academic practice that has increasingly articulated itself as an engagement with historically marginal forms of knowledge, as a “redemptive project of recuperating the figure of the subaltern as historical agent, and of re-presenting that agency that has remained until now unrepresented” (Williams 232). If a move toward engagement with underrepresented histories and subaltern knowledges in scholarly practice claims to be motivated by noble desire for increased egalitarianism and human progress, a story like “Dentista” suggests that it also might conceal a “perverse,” voyeuristic desire. Indeed, the dentist represents the fetishizing of subaltern knowledge by a representative of reason and learning, an “enjoyment of the subaltern” that can be read as an allegory of the Latin Americanist academy as it looks to the margin. Thus, “Dentista” poses the question directly to scholars in the field: “In studying subaltern and marginal epistemologies, are we being detectives, or perverts?”²

² In David Lynch’s film *Blue Velvet* (1986), whose influence on Bolaño is documented in *Between Parentheses* (2011), just before her friend Jeffrey breaks into the troubled female jazz singer’s apartment under the pretext of investigating the mystery of the severed ear, Sandy says, “I don’t know whether you’re a detective or a pervert.” This offhand comment responds to the ambiguity of Jeffrey’s motivations. Is he disinterestedly investigating a crime in order help right a wrong, and restore the singer’s life to order; or is he acting on a voyeuristic urge to spy on a beautiful woman, and glimpse the darker side of his upright hometown Lumberton, U.S.A.? The virtuous will to justice defining the true detective and the clean-cut American boy, and the sterile objectivity of his scientific method, seem to be fundamentally opposed to a voyeuristic, or erotic desire for illicit sexual fusion, the transgression of society’s ordering precepts driving the so-called “pervert.” Beyond Sandy’s discomfort in being unable to definitively distinguish which of these drives the protagonist, it becomes clear that even in making this observation, the perversion she alludes to is already rubbing off on her, the comment itself signaling a breakdown of conceptual order in its observation of the possibility that supposedly mutually exclusive concepts can somehow intermingle and contaminate one another. It is precisely this entry into taboo—which only intensifies as the *Bildungsroman* develops—that paradoxically marks the protagonists’ initiation into adulthood and citizenship.

From within the debate surrounding scholarship produced by the Latin American Subaltern Studies Collective in the 1980s and 90s, Gareth Williams has raised a similar question.³ In “The Fantasies of Cultural Exchange in Latin American Subaltern Studies” (1995) he points to a paradox defining the desire motivating the appropriation of subaltern knowledge into the academic literary canon, speaking specifically in terms of the celebrated testimonial work *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú*, as a paradigmatic example of this phenomenon. Williams reacts to John Beverley’s description of undergraduate students’ responses to the work, interpreting them as a kind of problematic *desencuentro*. The *testimonio*, rather than producing a deeper appreciation for the horror and suffering of marginal classes (i.e. a feeling of solidarity), seems to actually do the opposite, galvanizing the privileged Western student’s own identity as one that is marked by a nostalgia for what has been lost growing up in the first world. Rather than provoking horror, *testimonio* turns the subaltern into an object of desire. A disciplinary pleasure of reading *testimonio* ultimately looks like an egotistical consumption of otherness, perverse in its total reversal of the intended effect. “Indeed, it is precisely in the misrecognition of interior political matrices of verticality, and in the recognition of having lost something on the long, hard road to hegemony, that the perversity of U.S. enjoyment of the subaltern constructs itself” (Williams 245).

The conscientiously progressive academic practice of investigating and recuperating marginal discourses—itsself a kind of cultural detective work—is consequently revealed as a potential act of bad faith, a *Bildungsroman* in which the subject-constitution of the privileged unfolds at the expense of the subaltern. If

³ Williams’s consideration of this theoretical impasse—a tension between overcoming the iniquities produced by the center-periphery divide, vs. reproducing the divide in the valorization one of its poles (i.e. the subaltern)—is part of a larger dialogue within Latin American Subaltern Studies. This conversation has generally centered on a question about the very possibility of subaltern studies from within the academy (as manifested by Spivak’s seminal essay “Can the Subaltern Speak”) and the ethical pitfalls inhering in this question. In *Subalternity and Representation* John Beverley summarizes the problem, stating that the subaltern “cannot be represented adequately by academic knowledge because academic knowledge is a practice that actively *produces* subalternity (it produces subalternity in the act of representing it)” (2). Additionally, he points to protests made most notably by Mabel Moraña and Hugo Achúgar, the argument that subaltern studies itself “keeps Latin America in the place of the Other, a pretheoretical, marginal, calibanesque site in relation to metropolitan discourse,” thus reinforcing a relation of colonial domination between US and Latin American academies as well (Moraña 50).

Refer to the *Latin American Subaltern Studies Reader* for a list of some of the most important texts in this discussion. Additionally, a special issue of *Dispositio/n* edited by Gustavo Verdesio revisits and reconsiders this moment in the history of Latin Americanism. Elsewhere, Williams offers a critical firsthand account of these events in “Deconstruction and Subaltern Studies, or, a Wrench in the Latin Americanist Assembly Line.”

Williams suggests that our “disciplinary fantasy” of recuperating subaltern knowledge makes us both detectives and perverts, Bolaño helps complicate this view and understand it more deeply. Beyond merely condemning instances in which a vision of the margin ends up acting as “a tool for imperial representational self-knowledge in the place where it was supposed to be its very opposite,” as Alberto Moreiras describes in *The Exhaustion of Difference* (2001), Bolaño defines a fantasy of subaltern literature as a starting point for self-critical thought, as a means by which to begin recognizing the ideology that conditions our thinking without our being aware of it (216). The nostalgia and desire for the subaltern as a trace of the Real that attends the constitution of a first-world subject does not have to be uncritical and superficial.⁴ Becoming aware of this desire in all its perversity and darkness is in fact necessary for a deeper understanding of the vicissitudes of “verticality.”

“Dentista” is particularly useful for considering a crisis in cultural and subaltern studies because it represents their dialectical relationship to literary studies. Its critique of a disciplinary fantasy of recuperating and vindicating subaltern knowledge (via *testimonio* in the 1990s) includes the critique of literary studies that led to the formation of cultural studies in the first place. It does so in part by presenting a fantasy of subaltern literature, that is, a consideration of literature produced by a subaltern subject (in this case, the indigenous/mestizo writer José Ramírez), which is also a vision of *testimonio* taken to its logical extreme, as a form of narrative expression that appears to transcend the role of mere fiction, but nevertheless remains entrenched in a system of values established by the lettered city.⁵ In considering a hybrid of *testimonio* and literature, “Dentista” points to the dialectical relationship between these opposed discourses. The story doesn’t simply take one side or another in a debate about the value of literary studies vs. culture studies, but rather articulates the disciplinary impasse that occurs

⁴ Throughout the essay my use of the expression “the Real” refers to a definition elaborated by Slavoj Žižek, which I discuss at greater length below.

⁵ In *The Exhaustion of Difference* (2001) Alberto Moreiras calls attention to the blurry relationship between *testimonio* and literature, noting especially Elzbieta Sklodowska’s “discussion of *testimonio*’s paratextual apparatus” as “a useful and necessary reminder that the literary, even in its merely aesthetic dimension, is in any case a constant and irreducible presence in the testimonial text” (212). Moreiras elaborates further, writing, “*Testimonio* is *testimonio* because it suspends the literary at the very same time that it constitutes itself as a literary act: as literature, it is a liminal event opening onto a nonrepresentational, drastically indexical order of experience” (212). In a more recent article, “Of Failed Retreats: Postcolonial Theory and Post-Testimonial Narrative in Central American Writing,” Abraham Acosta describes how this question—specifically, a reactionary backlash against *testimonio*—continues to condition the definition of the Ecuadorian *mestizo* national subject.

with the realization that cultural studies perpetuates the problem it sought to overcome in responding to the hegemonic nature of literary discourse, when literary studies recognized its belonging to an elite, Eurocentric “lettered city.”⁶

“Dentista” responds to this impasse by conscientiously presenting itself as an act of literature in spite of a deep awareness of the problems involved in doing so. In this way, it addresses a concern similar to that which preoccupies *Los detectives salvajes*, which Emilio Sauri convincingly reads as a self-conscious expression of “the end of literature itself” attending to the dismantling of political utopias “underwritten by a brutal integration into the market precipitated by the ‘neoliberal turn’ of the 1970s” (416; 421). At the very least, “Dentista” is concerned with its own function as a literary work, in light of an apparent historical collapse of literature.

This ambivalence about its own status as a literary work develops over the course of the text, but is already visible in the opening sentence, when the narrator introduces the talented young writer (Ramírez) who will eventually become the center of the narrative, by stating: “No era Rimbaud, solo era un niño indio” (368). The narrator (who the reader soon learns is conspicuously unreliable) makes use of a well-worn trope: the idolization of the French poet Rimbaud as a metonym for a fantasy of European literary genius and the redemptive potential of literature in a post-romantic national republic generally defining Eurocentric Latin American culturalism. Furthermore, the reference to Rimbaud as the epitome of the cultured, European genius is overtly racialized, used in order to call attention to precisely what the indigenous subject is *not*, and setting up the French poet against the indigenous writer within the canonical schema of “civilization and barbarism.” Considering that “Dentista” is itself a literary work, this creates a paradox. The work of literature immediately begins to undermine the ground on which it stands by calling attention to dark side of the literary tradition in which it takes part, particularly, how literature has reinforced problems of social and economic inequality by acting as a Eurocentric fetish. Drawing attention to literature’s historical reinforcement of hegemonic ideologies, it

⁶ Beverley describes this moment of realization: “Since we were implicated in the ‘lettered city’ ourselves as teachers, critics, and writers, it was not just a question of studying something that was *outside* the academy—studying bandits or peasant rebellions, or doing anthropological fieldwork. It was a question of looking at our involvement in creating and reproducing relations of power and subordination as we continued to act within the framework of literature, literary criticism, and literary studies” (10). Beverley refers to the canonical work *The Lettered City* by Ángel Rama, that outlines the genealogy of a literate elite from the colony to independence and its centrality in Latin American culture.

indicates what can be likened to its “original sin,” and calls its own ethical force into question. And yet, it is a short story, a work of literature.

As it becomes clear that Bolaño is deliberately calling attention to the darker side of literary culture, and thus, destabilizing the very ground of the story he is writing, the reader is forced to ask: “What does Bolaño’s continuing to write literature mean if he is able to recognize its perhaps insurmountable historical failures?”⁷ By continuing to write the short story, is he displaying the kind of ideological blindness that Paul de Man describes in *Blindness and Insight*?⁸ Does he fail to recognize that he is performing the very thing he hopes history might overcome? Or, clinging to a desire for literature, does he outline a path to its redemption, a way in which that literature may transcend its sordid past?

I read “Dentista” as Bolaño’s self-conscious exploration of his own role as a purveyor of literature in a deeply divided Latin American society in which the “lettered city” operates. As noted, that is the foundational problem for subaltern studies. This becomes most apparent as the narrator grapples with a sense that something has gone wrong in his attempt to belong to the Left, and that this is somehow related to literature, or more specifically, to the writing of Mexican author Salvador Elizondo. Indeed, through the narrator’s reference to “Narda o el verano,” a text that the narrator himself uses to help him think about his relation to Ramírez, the recursive nature of the story becomes clear: the climactic reading scene in “Dentista” mirrors the one in “Narda,” a text that describes two young, upper-middle class men aestheticizing a marginal experience while on summer vacation. If the text is a consideration of the perversity of

⁷ Jean Franco raises this issue of Bolaño’s treatment of the historical failure of literature in her article “Questions for Bolaño” (2009), interrogating his ostensible redemption of literature in light of his representation of history as a march toward the abyss. In response to the wildly positive reception of his work—referring to *2666* and *Los detectives salvajes*—she calls attention to doubts arising from the darkness of what he depicts, writing: “Still, one cannot escape the fact that these novels, not to mention the brief novels that preceded them, represent a remarkable though possibly quixotic effort to redirect the whole literary enterprise and not only that, but do so in a moonscape of political and social disaster that encompasses post-coup Chile, the German retreat from Russia during the Second World War, Tlatelolco, Pinochet’s Chile, the death cult in Ciudad Juárez and even the first Liberian War” (Franco, “Questions,” 207). In *Cruel Modernity* she echoes this sentiment when treating the section of the crimes in *2666*, deaths that become meaningless, “as gratuitous as the haphazard features of the landscape” (Franco, *Cruel*, 204).

⁸ In *Blindness and Insight* (1971) de Man describes a “pattern of self-mystification that accompanies the experience of crisis,” through the example of Edmund Husserl, who demonstrated “the urgent philosophical necessity of putting the privileged European standpoint into question, but remained himself entirely blind to this necessity, behaving in the most unphilosophical way possible at the very moment when he rightly understood the primacy of the philosophical over empirical language” (De Man 16).

literary culture as a leftist voyeurism of the less fortunate, this recursive motif also raises the possibility that literature's perversity might be related to a matter of historical recurrence or a nihilistic repetition of the same. Such an intuition raises questions about how Bolaño's story differs from Elizondo's, and if the former is indeed a repetition of the latter.

In order to decide how to answer these questions, it is necessary to more fully account for the depth of the climactic scene in which the narrator and the dentist read short stories in Ramírez's home. After recognizing the extent to which this scene can be read both as an expression of a love of books and literature and a fantasy that equates subaltern knowledge with "the Real," it will be possible to move on to the question of re-writing.

A Fantasy of Subaltern Literature

The climactic scene of "Dentista" is strange in part because it juxtaposes two seemingly disparate social modes—inebriated fraternity and nerdiness—in an expression of a masculine literary romanticism. Immediately prior to the scene, the narrator and the dentist are out on the town, eating, doing shots of tequila, and reminiscing—reproducing tropes of typical masculine bonding. The culmination of this carnival represents the fusion of a Latin American culturalism and traditional machismo: rather than getting into the "normal" kind of trouble that occurs when "boys will be boys"—a trip to a brothel, a fight (as in another story by Bolaño, "Últimos atardeceres de la tierra"), or the destruction of property—the protagonists head to the outskirts of town to spend the early morning hours reading short stories in silence. The events presented here can be seen as the fantasy of an uncommonly literary person (the dentist, but also Bolaño), whose love of reading finds common ground with a cavorting typical of young men, that can involve collective transgression through illegal or otherwise illicit behavior. An activity more often seen as dull or disciplinary, in "Dentista" reading becomes transgressive insofar as it is presented as the culmination of a night of partying. It is as if, once inhibitions are lowered, the thing that they were not supposed to do, but did anyway, was to read. In this way, even before the scene unfolds, it is framed as an act of collective transgression.

The narrator's reluctance to go along with the dentist's plan most clearly implies his classist distaste for the prospect of spending time in a poor, indigenous person's dwelling, but then also, vacillation before the strangeness of a macho, cultured elitism that would combine partying and reading. In the writer's home, he seems

reluctant to sit down and read, perhaps because of his disgust for the impoverished surroundings, or perhaps simply due to the challenge of so abruptly transitioning from carousing to reading. The dentist insists, and the narrator's reaction is as follows: "El cuento tenía cuatro páginas, tal vez lo escogí por eso, por su brevedad, pero cuando lo acabé tenía la impresión de haber leído una novela" (386).

Even though the narrator is unwilling to accept that Ramírez is a great writer, as the opening line of "Dentista" suggests, his reaction to the stories is powerful. The narrator's sense that he has read a novel and not a four-page story conveys, for one, a feeling of defied expectations, a basic sense that Ramírez's work is somehow different than what it appears to be superficially. The surprise that something small and seemingly insignificant could contain depths is generally suggestive of the narrator's underestimation of Ramírez the person. But beyond this symbolic meaning, the work's density makes it seem actually supernatural; the stories contain more information than they ought to, or are in some other way warping the narrator's sense of time.

As the previously skeptical and resistant narrator continues to sit and read, it becomes clear that the stories are not only dense, but compelling:

[C]ogí otro cuento. Cuando volví a mirar a Ramírez éste dormía con la cabeza apoyada en los brazos. Yo también había sentido ramalazos de sueño, pero ahora me sentía completamente despierto, completamente sobrio. Mi amigo me alcanzó otro cuento. Lee éste susurró. Lo dejé a un lado. Terminé el que estaba leyendo y me puse a leer el que me había dado el dentista. (386)

The reading takes on a hushed intensity that adds to the mystery of its object. We never get to read the stories directly (although at one point the dentist does summarize one of them) and can only guess at their content. This feeling is reinforced by a general lack of dialogue, and indication that Bolaño does not wish to prosopopeically speak for the subaltern other. The stories' mystery contributes to the feeling that they are a glimmer of the Real. Like the unseen duel in Borges's "El Sur", the shining trunk of the Chevy Malibu in *Repo Man*, or the contents of the briefcase in *Pulp Fiction*, Ramírez's stories become an unattainable object of desire not only to the protagonists of the story (who cannot fully grasp the revelation they are experiencing) but for the reader as well, who doesn't get to read them. What do they contain? What compels the narrator to forget himself and read all night long? We cannot know for sure.

It is implied that the stories are compelling in part because of their literary merit. The dentist is involved in Irapuato's arts scene (he hangs out with the painter Cavernas, and organized Ramírez's participation in a poetry workshop) and we have

reason to put some stock in his claim that the boy's writing is "superior a todos [...] los narradores mexicanos" (383). There is also the early comparison between Ramírez and Rimbaud. Despite the fact that it is a negative comparison ("No era Rimbaud"), it is characterized by a certain irony; the narrator protests too much, and rather than belittling the indigenous writer, it suggests that perhaps he *is* a Rimbaud, a literary genius. There can be little question that what is at stake in this scene is literature as an elevated art form. Nevertheless, the effect it has on the readers is not one of detached admiration, but rather one of pleasure.

Even if the pleasure they derive from the stories is a result of their literary merit, the narrator and the dentist resemble boys reading pornography, learning about a secret or previously hidden reality. I would argue that if the literature they read were also a kind of pornography—if the compelling quality of the work were not merely an effect of incredible writing but of transgressive content—that it would not be the kind that shows nudity or sex, but rather, ruins.⁹ The content of Ramírez's stories reveal a hidden reality to the narrator and the dentist, his own experience on the margin in all its horror.¹⁰ As such, the stories take on the quality of *testimonio*, revealing secrets of the lower class to the upper-middle class readers that had previously been maintained by distance, the order imposed by the lettered city. A preceding scene in which the dentist and the protagonist discuss different kinds of history frames the transgressive nocturnal reading session, and casts it precisely in this way: as the revelation of a secret history ("La matriz de la historia particular es la historia secreta"), which is another word for the unread history of the subaltern subject (Bolaño 371). This secret history of porn or *testimonio* reveals the truth of misery, exploitation, and class difference.

In the eroticism that the revelation of this secret truth takes on, "Dentista" presents a conceptualization of subaltern literature as the Real, or "subaltern as Real"

⁹ The phenomena described in "Dentista" casts readers of subaltern literature much in the way that Kyle Chayka describes purveyors of "ruin porn" in his article "Detroit Ruin Porn and the Fetish for Decay." More than taking part in "the voyeuristic pleasure of ruined grandiosity," the protagonists enjoy a ruin of anonymity. Still, Chayka's critique could easily apply to the protagonists: "These 'parachuters' leave Detroit just as quickly as they arrived, contributing little but to the city's image of decay." See also Eli Rosenberg's "Motown of Ghost Town? Ruin Porn in Detroit."

¹⁰ The one indirect view of the content of Ramírez's work appears to describe his experience on the margin: "mi amigo empezó a contarme un cuento de Ramírez, un cuento sobre un niño que tenía muchos hermanos pequeños que cuidar, ésa era la historia, al menos al principio, aunque luego el argumento se convertía en una historia sobre el fantasma de un pedagogo encerrado en una botella...y aparecían otros personajes, dos merolicos más bien canallas, una veintiañera drogadicta, un coche inútil abandonado en la carretera que sería de casa a un tipo que leía un libro de Sade" (383).

(Beverley 2). In the crucial reading scene, the narrator who reads a kind of literary *testimonio* is subject to a revelation of a subaltern truth that he imagines to be a more authentic, something that is *more* real precisely because it is more elementally brutal. The harsh reality of the margin is like a Hobbesian state of nature, it exists prior to the formation of a social contract. For the poor, and those subject to exploitation, force is not mediated by law, but rather, *is* law.¹¹ Insofar as it would depict this world, subaltern literature exposes the secret pertaining equally to law, the state, and humanity. None of these ever succeeds in abolishing the state of nature, but rather ends up preserving it. The pursuit of comfort characterizing a cushy, upper-middle class life seeks to repress any trace of hardness, hunger, and want, while allowing it to persist elsewhere. The world the protagonists inhabit is one deployed to displace a hard and harsh reality. Confronted with the truth of poverty, it is as if the protagonists recognize their own world as one that is false and ideological. The repressed misery returns as a fantasy of *realness*.

This glimpse of the secret is also erotic because it takes on a quality of transgression, crossing into an area that is off limits.¹² For the protagonists, the breakdown of order is marked by their entry into a subaltern space. Rather than experiencing sorrow, or horror, they feel a nervous enjoyment that attends to a transgression of limits that marks a return to a more authentic way of being. In the extent to which this communion with the Real is marked by a sexual arousal (“Sus ojos brillaron de excitación”) it very clearly represents a conception of the erotic as defined by Georges Bataille: a state of exception or act of fusion is achieved through the act of transgression (Bolaño 385).

In the second volume of *The Accursed Share* George Bataille argues that human beings are constituted through an imposition of law (proscription or taboo) by which we separate ourselves from nature. Through this process of entering into an “artificial”

¹¹ Similarly, a perspective that, pejoratively or not, understands indigenous subject to pertain to a more “primitive” culture and state of being would also cast Ramírez’s world as a state of nature. Bolaño archives this register when the narrator wonders why the dentist would describe the “basurero” in which the writer lives as “campo”: “¿Pero qué campo?, dije yo. El campo que nos rodea, dijo el dentista y con su mano hizo un movimiento circular, como si Irapuato fuera una avanzada en tierra salvaje, un fuerte en medio del territorio apache” (383). The extent to which this perspective is racist helps reveal the episode to be an ideological fantasy.

¹² Bolaño also produces an aura of transgression when he introduces ambiguity about whether the dentist’s relationship with Ramírez is sexual. A blurring of sexual norms—a sense that the dentist might be taking part in a sexual relationship with a minor—becomes intertwined with the text’s consideration of subaltern literature in a way that adds to the sense that it is somehow transgressive and illicit.

or “fictive” contract, we constitute ourselves as subjects. Transgression of the taboo therefore provides a view to our experience of the world as it existed prior to its mediation by law (which is artificial by definition): the primitive, pre-subjective experience of being part of nature. This dream of overcoming alienation is expressed elsewhere as a fantasy of the Real. In his elaboration of this Lacanian concept in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, for example, Slavoj Žižek describes the Real as “the idea of a possible end to ideology,” “the illusion of a possible return to nature” (2; 5). For Žižek, the Real is forever unattainable, an “original ‘trauma’ an impossible kernel that resists symbolization, totalization, and symbolic integration,” but which nevertheless conditions and directs human desire (Žižek 6). While Bataille maintains that erotic experiences are in fact attainable, his thinking of the erotic still mirrors the Lacanian Real insofar as it is not a true return to a more primitive state of being because it is necessarily conditioned by a memory of prohibition that qualifies it as an act of transgression. The exaltation of eroticism is not actually part of the animal experience, but rather, is exclusively human. In “El Sur,” this same structure of eroticism would appear to define the protagonists’ experience of the subaltern realm.

The fact that the protagonists of “Dentista” do not read Ramírez’s stories in a bookstore, or in the comfort of their homes, but rather in the writer’s shack on the edge of town represents the breakdown of order that moves beyond the “subdued sublime” of normal *testimonio* (Moreiras 213).¹³ In the scene, there is unity between the stories’ narrative and the readers experience: the protagonists come face to face with a writer’s foreign world by reading it in literature and, moreover, they find themselves in that world and are able to more fully recognize it as a result of their reading. It is a dream of an ideal literature that blurs the lines between fantasy and reality. Signifier (subaltern literature) and signified (subaltern realm) come together in a way that flirts with the impossible, suggesting a return to a unified totality preceding the invention of the sign, when a word invoked the thing itself in the garden of Eden. At the logical extreme of this fantasy, at least one of Ramírez’s stories would portray the protagonists themselves reading subaltern literature in a shack on the outskirts of town (and insofar as that “Dentista” is that story, Ramírez is Bolaño’s subaltern *döppelgänger*). If the fantasy of subaltern literature is always secretly about the first-world reader’s experience, in a

¹³ Moreiras writes: “Testimonio provides its reader with the possibility of entering what we could call a subdued sublime: the twilight region where the literary breaks off into something else that is not so much the real as it is its unguarded possibility. This unguarded possibility of the real, which is arguably the very core of the testimonial experience, is also its preeminent political claim” (213).

fantasy of *ideal* subaltern literature, the upper-middle class readers would *have* to be the protagonists of Ramírez's stories; their constitution as subjects through subaltern literature would be literal, a process of coming into being through the writing of the absolute other.

Bolaño elaborates a critique of subaltern literature (and its counterpart, *testimonio*) as being organized around an impossible dream that one could be upper-middle class and at the same time truly understand the experience of the subaltern (or subaltern Real). Or at the logical extreme of this solidarity, it is the fantasy that one can be upper-middle class and subaltern at the same time. It is not surprising then, that prior to reading the stories, Ramírez's home is distasteful and off-putting to the narrator, but when presented in its aestheticized form—in literature—his world becomes compelling and fascinating. The narrator is unsure about spending time in a shack on the edge of town, but can't stop reading the stories that depict the same world. Thus, the fantasy of a subaltern literature is as much about the redemption of literature as it is about the redemption of the margin. In this fantasy, literature is the messiah that would redeem the subaltern space and subject, transform the "niño indio" into an almost-Rimbaud. The critic—the priest of literary culture—imagines that he discovers and redeems the unappreciated artist, and in so doing affirms his virtue. Consequently, he experiences the male-gendered, romantic pleasure of the explorer—of being the "first" to stand on the summit of a mountain, the pleasure of conquering nature: the sublime—and is at the same time absolved of a belonging to the elite that has been revealed as morally questionable (or less *real*), through his solidarity with the oppressed. A dream that the boredom of the everyday life produced by modern progress might yet give way to a more intense, less mediated experience, that would fill the moral vacuum effectuated by the same modernity; a subaltern Real represents the possibility of redemption for the modern subject.

Along the lines that Williams observed in regards to the student reaction to *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú*, the transformation of a subaltern literature into a fantasy of redemption for the well-off is perverse because in reality it undermines literature's noblest aims, and inverts its function. Rather than acting as a means by which to express ongoing suffering and marginalization—the representation of a previously unrepresented subject, the emerging voice of the voiceless, emancipation—the suffering it describes becomes an object of desire for the more fortunate. As Moreiras describes: "The testimonial subject, in the hands of the Latin Americanist cultural critic,

has a tendency to become epistemologically fetishized precisely through its (re)absorption into the literary system of representation” (215). It functions as a dream that the beneficiaries of modernity can also exit at will: that we can have our cake and eat it too. Therefore, as a means of the all-too-modern subject’s redemption—as a tool for privileged—subaltern literature does not actually redeem the one who writes it, but rather, keeps him enslaved. It becomes slum tourism; a vacation spot that reinforces the oppression that made it a destination in the first place, helping the playing customer to feel better about his own role in creating it.

Ideology and Repetition

Solidarity, or a feeling of empathy for the oppressed that has historically resonated with leftist politics, proves insufficient to immunize one against indulging in exploitative fantasy. Even though the narrator of “Dentista” senses that he is doing something questionable when entering Ramírez’s home—even having previously reflected on this very form of exploitation—it doesn’t stop him from becoming a consumer of the margin. This is perhaps the central problematic presented (and, in asserting itself as a work of literature, performed) by “Dentista”: a helplessness to commit an error one recognizes as such, to repeat a mistake one has identified as a mistake in the past. Bolaño articulates a crisis of literature, cultural studies, and the left in these terms, through the protagonists’ repetition, or re-performance of the events represented in Salvador Elizondo’s *Narda o el verano*.¹⁴

Earlier in “Dentista,” when the protagonists are out on the town, the narrator muses about how his friendship with the dentist developed through a mutual appreciation of literature and film, in particular, the work of the Mexican writer Salvador Elizondo. He notes that they even went so far as to reproduce the events described in one of his short stories: “La amistad entre ambos fue espontánea: esa misma noche supe de su admiración por Elizondo, que yo también profesaba, y durante el segundo verano ambos quisimos emular a los personajes de *Narda o el verano* alquilando una casita cerca del mar en Mazatlán” (379).

¹⁴ In “Case Closed: Madness and Dissociation in 2666” (2009) Brett Levinson considers a similar phenomenon of literary repetition in Bolaño’s novel *2666*. He understands the motif of literary repetition in Bolaño less explicitly as a matter of ideology, and more as literature’s nihilistic self-reproduction: “that repetition or intervention represents, comments upon, and reformulates no rules except those of language, literature, other Bolaño narratives, and *2666* itself” (187). He understands this nihilism of literary form as madness.

The characters' quixotic emulation of *Narda o el verano* is surprising in light of what that text describes: an ironic, and far from flattering story of two young, misogynistic, upper-class men who decide to share a woman during summer vacation. The narrator of Elizondo's story muses:

No teníamos mucho dinero, pero sí el suficiente para alquilar una pequeña *villa* situada en lo alto de los acantilados y que domina toda la bahía. Teníamos también un bonito automóvil deportivo y un poco por curiosidad, pero también, claro está, por economía, habíamos decidido compartir una sola mujer entre los dos. (Elizondo 46)

In their conversation about this plan, the narrator and Max are frank about viewing women as existing principally for their own pleasure, as sex-objects: "Max se inclinaba por una mujer rica, *blasée*, culta y de cuarenta años. Yo, por mi parte, pensaba que el ideal sería una *demi-mondaine* adolescente, tonta y pobre. Sería más fácil manipularla a nuestro antojo" (47-8). They end up settling on Narda, the wayward, eponymous female protagonist. Through their association with Narda's ex-boyfriend Tchomba, who cultivates an image of a cannibal (he has pointed teeth, a human-skull xylophone, and his African food restaurant is adorned by "un anuncio de neón que representaba un árbol enorme cuyos frutos eran calaveras humanas"), their treatment of Narda is itself cast as a kind of cannibalism (82). Although it is Tchomba who confesses to Narda's murder after her dead body turns up in the bay, her treatment by the protagonists as a consumer item, to be disposed of at the end of the summer, creates a feeling that they are also implicated in her death. The fact that they treat this event not as a tragedy, but rather, as a buzz-kill, makes us believe that the protagonists are reprehensible consumers of marginal people. If the title of the story raises a question about what quality the woman and the summer share, the horrible answer would seem to be: finitude—each is an exceptional state that produces a wistful nostalgia even before it has come to an end.

It is something of a relief that the narrator of "Dentista" quickly admits to feelings of shame and regret at having wished to emulate the protagonists of *Narda o el verano*. Nevertheless, it does not entirely clarify why he would have wanted to emulate those characters in the first place. The mystery deepens when, almost in the same breath, he suggests his identification with the Latin American left.

Después crecimos y nuestras aventuras juveniles nos parecieron más bien detestables. Los jóvenes mexicanos de clase media alta estamos condenados a imitar a Salvador Elizondo que a su vez imita a un inimitable Klossowski o a engordar lentamente en el comercio o en la burocracia o a dar palos de ciego en organizaciones vagamente de izquierdas, vagamente caritativas. Entre

Elizondo, cuya obra ya no releía, y el pintor Cavernas se consumía nuestra hambre inagotable, y con cada bocado que dábamos éramos más pobres, más flacos, más feos, más ridículos. (Bolaño 379-380)

In spite of the regrets that this passage expresses, the question remains: why would a left-leaning individual committed to social justice wish to reproduce the actions of the misogynistic and racially bigoted protagonists of *Narda o el verano*?

A simple explanation is that the narrator comes around to his social conscience by way of precisely this kind of experience, thanks to a growing regret about his own complicity—passive or active—in the structures that reinforce inequality. If he didn't see himself as part of the left when he played *Narda* in his youth, the gnawing emptiness that such experiences produced ended up turning him in that direction.

Still, such an explanation does not account for the way in which the protagonists—the dentist in particular, who works in a clinic for the poor and indigent—find themselves returning to the exploitative, narcissistic, and transgressive tourism they had ostensibly put away with other childish things. Their return to youthful foible in visiting Ramírez's home could be seen as but the latest episode in a long series of repetitions: the previous selves they echo imitated protagonists of a writer who is cast as an imitator of Klossowski (and beyond that, *Bovary*, *Menard*, *Quijote*). Such repetition evokes a host of philosophical tropes that represent various lines for a rethinking of subaltern literature (repetition and difference, parody/irony, ideological blindness, and the eternal return to the same).

"Dentista" observes that the repetition of the past and imitation of fiction performed by the protagonists also defines a transgressive fantasy of the subaltern real, the paradoxical structure of subaltern literature, and an ongoing crisis of the left-leaning upper-middle class. It suggests that the left is caught in a nihilistic decadence (a repetition of the same that signifies stagnation), and that this decadence is related to a structure by which curiosity and compassion turn into a narcissistic fantasy.

For one, the void of capitalist modernity is identified as a part of the reason for this repetition; the experience of the well-intentioned member of the middle class is that of a new subjectivity defined as consumer perhaps more than citizen. If Bolaño himself performs a re-inscription of Elizondo in his references to *Narda*, he certainly continues to riff on themes of cannibalism and human sacrifice in their function as symbols of the ethical outcome of post-war capitalism: the nihilism, unfillable void, or hunger upon which consumer culture depends. After all, the profession of the title character of "Dentista" is to repair teeth, used for consumption. Bolaño's critique of

subaltern literature must also be a critique of the a literary marketing that includes the boom. In such a reading of “Dentista,” an ideology of consumption would act as the self-fulfilling prophecy of nihilism that causes the protagonists to remain stuck as individuals who want to contribute to society but don’t know how.

In addition, the story accounts for the ideological structure that Bataille and Žižek describe: that the desire to transgress is reinforced largely by the prohibition itself; and a corresponding desire for an impossible return to the Real that is produced by a perhaps inherent, or primitive alienation. There is a basic recognition here that the utopian dreams of equality and fraternity are motivated by a fantasy of returning that can quickly become totalitarian.

Furthermore, however, this repetition in “Dentista” calls attention to an ideological structure inherent to the fantasy of subaltern literature in particular, but then also literature in general, and possibly any form of writing. The failure to arrive upon a perfect leftist position that is related to an exploitative pleasure that arises from a confrontation with the Other—the fact that one’s good intentions, and positive outcomes of those intentions can never be made perfectly identical—mirrors an undecidability inherent in the iterative (doubled) structure of language, the rift between signifier and sign explored by Derrida and de Man. It would seem that the pleasure that literature itself produces, and the social awareness it would seek to cultivate, might be fundamentally at odds.

The work Bolaño echoes—*Narda*—is characterized by this ironic structure, an uncertainty about whether the text condemns or affirms the protagonist’s misogyny and racism. This is most clear in the set of jokes developed around Tchomba. The African prince is a potentially subversive character, manipulating the protagonists with their own bigotry, using their expectation that he is an ignorant savage to his own advantage, to disguise his intentions. And yet, the way in which this play becomes a source of humor in the text relies not only on the racist expectations of the protagonists, but of the readers as well. Tchomba, who has been labeled by the narrator as a savage and a cannibal, at one point lists the contraband he is selling. The list is funny because along with the items one might expect from a cannibal contrabandist (“carne de tubab [European person] condimentada con salsa de hashish”), he includes other items one might not expect, but which would hold particular allure for the protagonists: most notably, the “manuscrito autógrafo de Ezra Pound” (Elizondo 65). Apparently, in addition to human organs, drugs, and Nazi paraphernalia, Tchomba has a knowledge

of modern literature, and connections to the circles that deal in rare books. The ostensibly crude and uneducated barbarian defies expectations both with his erudition and the intelligence of his ploy. The elite, lettered narrator takes the bait, and is ultimately duped into exchanging his services for a fake Pound manuscript.

While superficially, this portrayal of the literate cannibal might seem to undo and subvert racial stereotypes, the reader's enjoyment of this section is awkward nevertheless. Does one laugh because the mention of a Pound manuscript on the list of illicit contraband is inherently surprising? Or does one laugh because, like the narrator, he is surprised that Tchomba would be so sophisticated?¹⁵ Awareness of this question causes the reader's laughter to become nervous. The ambiguity about whether one is actually taking pleasure in what is meant in part as a racist joke gives way to a more powerful one. If the story problematically provides a space in which to laugh at a racist joke, it is by the same measure rhetorically effective as a critique of the privileged reader, insofar as through his enjoyment, he would begin to identify with the protagonists for which he is at the same time building contempt. When the reader laughs knowingly at the Ezra Pound reference, he too is being tricked, in a sense, into revealing his own pertinence to the literary lettered class. The unease he experiences through his awareness of this ambiguity only heightens the pleasure he experiences in the laughter; the pleasure produced by humor transforms into the pleasure produced by mischievously breaking a rule. (One cannot help but note the similarities between this and the climactic reading scene of "Dentista"). In this enjoyment of rule-breaking—that one is being a little naughty, while at the same time feeling secure in literary learnedness—the reader draws even closer to the protagonists. In this way, it is precisely through the troubling ambiguity of his humor that Elizondo establishes an identity between the protagonist and the reader, thus causing his work to uncannily brush up with the Real. *Narda o el verano*, while not being subaltern literature, nevertheless acts as a fantasy of absolute literature in the way we imagined Ramírez's stories would, as a text in which the reader discovers that he is the protagonist, a fiction that becomes real as he reads it, and more specifically, a self-fulfilling prophecy that the appreciative reader will be a swine and get away with it. That is, through the reading itself, he will gain a view to death, cruelty, and exploitation from a position of comfort and privilege, and maybe even come away from it with a good lesson or two.

¹⁵ See Phil Deloria's *Indians in Unexpected Places* (2004) for an important critique of humor derived from finding an indigenous person behaving in a way that seems anachronistic or surprising.

Like Elizondo's story, the power of "Dentista" is also rooted in its irony, Bolaño's somewhat admiring rewriting of the story it might also hope to critique. Even if the narrator is conspicuously unreliable (on various occasions admitting that he doesn't know what the dentist is talking about, while the reader does) it would appear that he nevertheless serves as a relatively direct mouthpiece for Bolaño himself when describing his admiration for Elizondo, and its resulting spiritual destructiveness as something akin to a *pharmakon*, food that only left him feeling more hungry. If "Dentista" is a good story, one is not sure whether this is because it critiques exploitative reading, or because it provides an opportunity to vicariously indulge in a fantasy of subaltern literature. One can certainly read this undecidability—the question about whether we are detectives or perverts—as another example of how his work marks the exhaustion not only of subaltern literature and *testimonio*, but of redemptive reading altogether—"the exhaustion of the modern articulation between literature and the public space of reading that granted to it a particular social function (illustration, education, moral exemplification, etc.)" (Villalobos 194). We can no longer read without being implicated as exploiters, bigots, colonizers, or criminals. As Villalobos-Ruminott observes of Bolaño's *oeuvre* in general, in "Dentista," "Literature does not save but condemns us to be part of the very logic of global violence" (195).

But even as such, the same reading that condemns us continues to be a source of enjoyment and pleasure. The story manifests in so many ways that a desire for literature (not to mention subjectivity, identity, and the nation) persists through this epochal awareness of the manner in which it condemns us, or even more, becomes more exciting because of it. The structural meaning of Bolaño's rhetorical irony suggests that this exhaustion of literature that he contemplates would not be epochal so much as something that has always been the case. In the catharsis of ancient Greek tragedy, and in the sufferings of a God on the cross, we have derived pleasure and sought redemption from the suffering of others. And indeed, literature has always posited aestheticized, exotic, fascinating conflict not only for edification, but for entertainment. Bolaño suggests that the question this raises, in all its fundamental undecidability—am I a detective or am I a pervert?—is the starting point for the study of both literature and cultural studies, the form of social consciousness that would need to define any so-called post-literary age. With this awareness, it will no longer be surprising that students should read Rigoberta Menchú perversely, as a cipher of their own suffering as members of the global elite, as a symptom, but also a poisonous

remedy for their own lack of “authenticity.” Indeed, Elizondo and Bolaño write a post-literary *Bildungsroman* in which otherness is a means by which the privileged can know themselves (“a tool for imperial representational self-knowledge”), as the Real by which they formulate themselves as subjects (Moreiras 216). Understanding the structural necessity of this perverse reading—that such a reading cannot be avoided—will make it possible to address it more honestly and effectively. Instead of only condemning this kind of reading, and contributing to its exacerbation as a form of mischief, it is possible to utilize it as a doorway for a direct consideration of the desire for the Real that the subaltern fantasy expresses. As such, literary, cultural, and subaltern studies will become an investigation of our collective motivating ideologies.

A view of literature as something that is valuable because it is able to cast a reflection of our abasement qualifies its problematic function as a Eurocentric marker of elite status in a way that can lead to productive thought. Cultural and subaltern studies must also be seen in this way. Instead of characterizing perverse reading as something to be repressed and excised at all cost, heralding the end of literary and cultural studies, Bolaño, in rewriting Elizondo’s tale, chooses to go deeper into it. Rather than choosing blindness and burning the library, he supplements it. It isn’t literature for its own sake, but rather, a refusal to disavow the past. More than just a sign of stagnation and exhaustion—an endless repetition of the same—Bolaño’s work testifies to a conviction that the pleasure derived from reading can still promote a more critical and less deluded self-understanding if one can stand to fix one’s gaze at the paradoxes that produce it.

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