

The true poet is he who is always abandoning themselves. Never too long in the same place, like the guerrillas, like UFOs, like the white eyes of the prisoner serving a life sentence...

-The death of the swan, the last swansong, the last song of the black swan, these ARE NOT in the Bolshoi but rather in the pain and the intolerable beauty of the streets.¹

Since the publication in 1998 of his semi-autobiographical novel Los detectives salvajes (the English translation of which – ‘The Savage Detectives’ – appeared only in 2007, four years after the author’s death) the self-exiled Chilean writer Roberto Bolaño has drawn critical acclaim throughout both the Hispanic and Anglophone literary worlds. Less well known than Bolaño the novelist though is Bolaño the poet – and it was as a poet that he regarded himself and wished to be recognised as above all else.

The recent publication of an English translation of Bolaño’s first collection of verse, Los perros románticos (which originally appeared in Spanish in 2000) is therefore a highly significant event, especially so since Bolaño’s poetic movement of infrarrealismo (disguised as ‘visceral realism’) forms the main subject of Los detectives salvajes. In the framing narrative of that novel, the fictional alter egos of Roberto Bolaño and Mario Santiago Papasquiaro (co-founder of the infrarrealista school), Arturo Belano and Ulises Lima, are engaged in a quest as literary detectives to find a legendary ‘lost’ Mexican poet - Cesárea Tinajero - in the northern desert of Sonora. Belano and Lima believe that poetry must not simply be written but also ‘lived’ and reject all literature that derives its legitimacy from external sources, whether it is the state or that fickle arbiter of taste known as ‘public
opinion’. Thus, they refuse to publish their work in university literary journals and shun the conventional networks of artistic patronage – even turning up at poetry recitals and other gala events to heckle and abuse those poets – such as the great Octavio Paz – who enjoyed the official support of the Mexican cultural establishment.

The core aesthetic of infrarrealismo can be summed up in the lines quoted above from Roberto Bolaño’s 1976 manifesto, a celebration of nocturnal urban existence and the transitoriness of life. The title of Bolaño’s manifesto “Déjenlo todo, nuevamente” appears to have been inspired by André Breton’s 1923 essay “Leave Everything”, in which the French surrealist poet famously called upon his readers to:

*Leave everything*
*Leave Dada.*
*Leave your wife, leave your mistress.*
*Leave your hopes and fears.*
*Drop your kids in the middle of nowhere.*
*Leave the substance for the shadow.*
*Leave behind, if need be, your comfortable life and promising future.*
*Take to the highways*
However, while Breton proposes a more or less Dionysiac process of surrendering to the unconscious in the act of poetic creation, Bolaño is not prepared to leave his choice of imagery to mere chance, or as Mallarmé would say to “a roll of the dice”. Rather, what he proposes is a targeted and deliberate focus on the margins and borders of life – as he writes elsewhere in his manifesto “Everyday forms of life and forms of death pass through the retina. Their constant collision gives life to infra-realist forms: THE EYE OF TRANSITION”. In this way, what for Breton and the surrealists were merely means of approaching some deeper and more profound reality (madness, drug-induced hallucinations, dream voyages) are for Bolaño and his co-thinkers the subject of poetry in- and of-itself. This particular choice of subject and imagery – rather than any particular revolutions in style or medium – constitutes perhaps the most novel or experimental aspect of Bolaño’s poetry.

The theme of liminality is visible right from the beginning of Romantic Dogs in the title poem. Here the author recalls his arrival in Mexico City as a refugee from the regime of Augusto Pinochet (via a short stopover in El Salvador where he met with the poet Roque Dalton and guerrilla fighters of the FMLN) having as he tells us “…lost a country / but won a dream”. This theme is further developed in “Mr. Wiltshire”, in which the author identifies with Robert Louis Stevenson’s English trader gone native in the South Seas: “…the one who killed Case and never went back to England / you’re like a cripple turned into a hero by love: / you’ll never go back to your homeland (but which is your homeland?)” For Bolaño then, as for Cioran, it would seem that exile is almost a precondition for the writing of poetry.

In a number of other poems (“The Worm”, “The Outsider Ape”, “The Donkey”) Bolaño celebrates the hostile nature of the Mexican landscape, whose great redeeming virtue for him it seems is the impossibility of projecting onto it any kind of human attachment.

Elsewhere, in a clear nod to the great hero of the French surrealists, the Comte de Lautréamont, he relishes the juxtaposition of 17th century Parisian architecture with “…the shit of 20th century pigeons” (“La Francesa”) and romantic love with “…a severed head, / The head of a Breton count or king”.

Undoubtedly the overall tone in this collection is confessional, but since for Bolaño and the infrarrealistas the boundaries between life and art are non-existent it would be wrong to classify Romantic Dogs as some kind of neo-Whitmanesque “song of myself”. Rather, following another of his other key literary models – the Peruvian “Hora Zero” movement of the early 1970s – what Bolaño seeks here is a kind of “poesía integral” in which to quote from his 1976 manifesto again “Our ethic is Revolution, our aesthetic life, one-and-the-same-thing”. In this way the lives of Bolaño and his fellow infrarrealistas are mythologised and made into the subject of poetry (as for example in the imagined motorbike journey by Bolaño and Mario Santiago through northern Mexico described in “The Donkey”). Indeed, as more than one critic has noted, it is almost impossible for us to separate Bolaño the poet and novelist from Bolaño the self-created myth.

In one of the final poems in the collection dedicated to the great Chilean ‘anti-poet’ Nicanor Parra, Bolaño gives us perhaps the best summary of this aesthetic of paradox that is always turning in on, always negating itself:

*Get walking, then, Latin Americans*
*Get walking get walking*
*Start searching for the missing footsteps*
*Of the lost poets*
*In the motionless mud*
Let’s lose ourselves in nothingness
Or in the rose of nothingness
There where the only things heard are
Parra’s footsteps
And the dreams of generations
Sacrificed beneath the wheel
Unchronicled
