Two perspectives regarding post-Enlightenment violence: *In an Antique Land* by Amitav Ghosh and *Nocturno de Chile* by Roberto Bolaño

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Abstract

In this article, we will review two different visions regarding the relationship between Western Civilization and violence, two strategies used to expose the dark side of Enlightenment and the ways to overcome it. In *In an Antique Land* (1994), we will examine Amitav Ghosh's attempts to modify the modern/colonialist practice of anthropology, shifting the traditional axis of hegemony and subalternity, deconstructing the fixity of representation, and proposing a new, more horizontal and familiar relation with the Other. In *Nocturno de Chile* (2000), Roberto Bolaño exhibits how Enlightenment (and literature) has been used to hide and justify the deployment of violence. Also, we will attempt to find Bolaño's exit to *that corridor, with apparently no way out*.

Keywords: Amitav Ghosh, Roberto Bolaño, *In an Antique Land*, *Nocturno de Chile*, Postcolonialism, post-Enlightenment critique.

In 1835, Lord Macaulay wrote a report regarding Indian education, proposing shifting from traditional to Western education. He was a liberal politician who believed Europe had the civilizational mission of spreading its knowledge. He aimed to create "a class of persons Indian in blood and color, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals, and intellect" (*Minute* 9). Even though he confessed that he had "no knowledge of either Sanskrit or Arabic," he "read translations of the most celebrated Arabic and Sanskrit works" and concluded that "a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia" (3). Hence, "we have to educate a people who cannot at present be educated by means of their mother tongue" (3). Post-Enlightenment saw the world's civilizations divided into two categories: a superior civilization (European) and an inferior civilization (all the others) and, thus, provided the moral responsibility for Europeans to replace the Other's inferior knowledge with their superior knowledge. Many contemporary authors have contested this patronizing attitude. In this article, I attempt to explore two visions dealing with the negative aspects of this civilizational mission. First, through the analysis of Amitav Ghosh's *In an Antique Land*, where we look at how two members of ancient civilizations (Indian and Egyptian) compete to establish their superior proficiency in Western knowledge; however, at the end of their discussion, it becomes no more than their superiority claim to the technology of modern violence. Ghosh tries to counterpose the tendency to dichotomize humanity in the categories of *us* and *them* with a more horizontal relation with the Other. We will then explore, through Roberto Bolaño's *Nocturno de Chile*, the use of Enlightenment not only to justify the deployment of violence but also to hide the horrors of Western civilization.

The Fraudulent Familiarity

Edward Said, in *Culture and Imperialism*, considers *Orientalism* not only as a Western strategy for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient (*Orientalism* 3) but also as a strategy of discourse used as much with the Oriental Other as with every Non-Western Other (*Culture* 19).[1]

James Clifford suggests that if Orientalism has a structure, as Said believes, this structure resides in the tendency to dichotomize humanity in *us* and *them*; and to essentialize the resultant other (Clifford 257). This Other is the subject of the ex-colonies, or the *Third World*, or the *periphery*, the *margins*, the *underdeveloped* and *mysterious* Non-West, and has been described through time as *savage*, *primitive*, *native*, *barbarian*, *exotic, magical,* and *irrational* as opposed to the *Self*, which lives in the *Center*, the *Metropolis*, the *First World*, the *civilized, fraternal,* and *rational* West.[2] The West (Europe and the United States) needs to create this Other to define itself.

In *Orientalism*, Said mentions that the West created two kinds of representation of the Other: one as the strange and mysterious, regarding which it "shivers with delight–or fear of–novelty" and another one as a "poor and fake version" of what is familiar to him (90). As an example, he mentions the West's conception of Islam, a religion similar to their Christianity–thus, they can see some familiarity with it, however, only as the fraudulent version of Christianity (60). The Other can be familiar only as an incomplete, immature or fraudulent version of the West. This strategy allows for keeping the familiarity under the aura of alienness. Thus, Mohammed is always the imposter (familiar because he pretends to be like Jesus) and always the Oriental (alien, because he is not Jesus) (73).

This is a way the West can protect their view of things from threatening new information. The West's depiction of the Other through familiar images is less a way to understand and connect with that Other than a way to control his/her image under Eurocentric hierarchical values. But what happens when that hierarchy is deleted from the equation? Said focuses his study on the representations that European travelers going to the East gave to European audiences. Exoticism was appealing to the audience. What happens when the person who visits the periphery is not from the Metropolis? In *In an Antique Land,* Amitav Ghosh gives a semi-fictional account of his experience as a non-Western anthropologist living in Egypt.

The Jamaican anthropologist, David Scott, suggested that to undermine the asymmetry in anthropological practice "one wonders whether there might not be a more engaging problematic to be encountered where the postcolonial intellectual from Papua New Guinea goes, not to Philadelphia but to Bombay or Kingston or Accra" (Scott 80). We propose that this kind of traveler reproduces the same strategy that Said attributes to someone who is faced with the new: they see familiar images, but they do not reduce them in the way he says Christians did with Islam; they do not consider those familiar images as fraudulent–or primitive–versions of their hometown images. The imbalance in power vanishes. One street in a small village in Egypt reminds Ghosh of a village in India (*Antique* 20).[3] Thus, otherness becomes familiar, without reductionist intentions or essentialism, allowing the possibility to understand one's situation by looking at the self in the other.

The case of *In an Antique Land*

Amitav Ghosh's *In An Antique Land* is an extraordinary text that finds examples of this kind of familiarity. The text could be classified in an ambiguous space between novel, travelogue, chronicle, autobiography, and anthropological or historical research. The book follows two journeys: that of a Jewish merchant from Egypt to India in the twelfth century, about whom Ghosh is researching as an anthropologist through documents that were kept in a Synagogue in Cairo; and the other is Ghosh's experience in Egypt while he was doing his research.

As an anthropologist, Ghosh is aware of the problems this discipline has been burdened with since its beginning. In the words of the Indian anthropologist, T.N. Madan: "Anthropology has been the effort of certain intellectuals to make sense of non-Western cultures of the world in the manner dictated by Western science" (*Pathways* 132).[4] Madan sees anthropology as the late child of the union between Enlightenment and colonialism (147). Enlightenment elevated the study of human society to the status of a positive science, generating an excessive emphasis on the otherness of those studied. Thus, for Madan, the Other is made the object of study rather than its subjects (159). He insists on the need for a new kind of anthropology, in which "the questioner and the respondent speak to one another, and the latter is not merely an informant answering questions, but also one who questions the questions" (160).

Ghosh seems to be aware of those critiques and deliberately offers a partial and dialogic narrative. He does not try to be absent from the text but displays his character within the text as a fundamental part of his investigation. The position in which Ghosh places himself differs from the position that past anthropologists had. He is not coming from the Center and does not belong to the periphery he is depicting in his writings. Due to this position, Ghosh can develop a new relationship with the locals. He does not always consider the locals as *Others,* nor do locals treat him as such. "Ghosh indicates that knowledge of the Other can only ever be partial, subjective, and historically conditioned. Grand narratives are rejected in favor of 'rich confusions' (Chambers 2). And something new appears: a less hierarchal connection between *Amitab* and the locals; a point of encounter in which the similarities sometimes fade out the differences. The name is not misspelled. Since the beginning of the text, Ghosh names the main character of this autobiographical chronicle not in the way he is originally named but in the way the locals call him, either because they don't know the sound of the "v" at the end of Ghosh's name, or as a manner to transform him in a more local version of himself–fading out the differences. Thus, Ghosh registers not only his view of the locals but also the transformation that even he suffers as a foreigner in the local's views. He is, simultaneously translating a culture while being himself translated by the people from that culture. *Amitab* is a mixture of both the anthropologist and the anthropologized subject.

Familiarizing the Other

Ghosh's text covers a wide range of familiarities. The first familiarity he expresses is the one mentioned before: geography. Cairo, like Delhi, is not so much a single city as an archipelago of townships, founded on neighboring sites by various dynasties and rulers" (*Antique* 20). As a traveler, he does not feel the novelty of the new city as a barrier that exposes him to an unrecognizable and threatening space. He relates the new city to his memories.

Language is another barrier that Ghosh attempts to overcome. As an up-to-date anthropologist, he knows that a culture cannot be translated. Instead of learning classical Arabic, he chose the dialect of Lataifa, the village where he lives. One of the boys of the village tells another boy: "He is learning to talk just like us" (30). Amitab wants to understand villagers' dialogues in the market. In the text, Ghosh constantly uses Arabic words and explains them as proof that language–and culture, of course–is never totally translatable. Amitab wants to know about the problems of the villagers; moreover, he is even proud when someone in the village considers himself as one of them. Ustaz Sabry, a local teacher, explains to the boys of the village that they should welcome Amitab as if he were *a brother* because, for this teacher, India and Egypt are brother countries against imperialism. Thus, he proposes a *postcolonial brotherhood*:

> Our countries are very similar, for India, like Egypt, was largely an agricultural nation, and the majority of its people lived in villages, like the Egyptians… Our countries were poor, for they had both been ransacked by imperialists and now they were both trying, in very similar ways, to cope with poverty and all the other problems that had been bequeathed to them by their troubled histories. ... No Egyptian could ever forget the support that his country had received from India during the Suez crisis of 1956, when Egypt had been subjected to an unprovoked attack by the British and the French (106).

For this teacher, the colonial past and the underdeveloped present place India and Egypt in a familiar, nonhierarchical relationship. Ustaz Sabry's mother leaves no doubt: "Son said that people of Egypt and India have been like brothers for centuries. So, you must *consider yourself one of our family*" (151, emphasis added). There is one young man in the village, Khamees, with whom Amitab feels a different kind of familiarity: "Almost despite myself, I felt instantly *at home* with him: he had that brightness of eyes and the slightly sardonic turn to his mouth that I associated with coffee houses in Delhi and Calcutta; he seemed to belong to a *familiar world* of lecture rooms, late night rehearsals and black coffee" (151, emphasis added).

Generational closeness, similar attitudes towards life, and a common sense of humor fade out the distance and difference that Amitab feels with this young man, and identification occurs. Life in Egypt is a constant remembrance of home for Amitab. For example, the way a man grabs his clothes while crossing a field is "very much in the manner that women hitch up their saris during the monsoons in Calcutta" (35). And reaching the end of the book, when Amitab is back at home, a Pujari tells him a story about a shrine that the government wanted to relocate to build a road, but the people opposed the modernization plans, and the road ultimately went around the shrine. The Pujari asks Amitab: "'Have you ever heard of anything like that…' 'Yes', I said, 'I heard a very similar story once, in Egypt'" (218). Home reminds Amitab of Egypt, and Egypt reminds him of home.

The strategy of familiarity reaches its peak when Amitab describes Egypt not as like his home but as another home. After seven years, Amitab goes back to Lataifa. He had imagined that moment all those years. "But now, traveling down the road after so many years, I felt no excitement at all, only an old, familiar sensation." Immediately after this *familiar sensation*, the driver asks Amitab with suspicion: "Aren't you a foreigner? Why are you going there all alone so late at night?" (86).

Even though Amitab feels that he is coming back to his second home, the driver's hostility makes him aware of the ambiguity of that sensation. Amitab's experience of being considered one of them, a part of the family, someone who shares a similar history or present, someone that should feel at home in Egypt, is not only confronted with the driver's hostility on account of his being a foreigner, also by Nabeel, a friend of Amitab's who tries to understand what it means to be a foreigner, far from home. Nabeel empathizes with Amitab´s longing. He tells Amitab: "It must make you think of all the people you left at home when you put that kettle on the stove with just enough water for yourself." Then, another boy contradicts Nabeel: "Why should it? He has us and so many other friends to come here and have tea with him; he has no reason to be lonely." And Nabeel answers: "It's not the same thing. Think how you would feel?" (121).

What Nabeel is saying is that no matter how much Egypt could resemble home to Amitab, it is not home. Nabeel is trying to empathize with the feeling of being an *Other*. "It is Nabeel who by an act of the imagination intimates what it must mean for Ghosh to live as a stranger among strangers" (Chew 114). Amitab, after listening to Nabeel´s words, reflects: "Nabeel's comment stayed in my mind; I was never able to forget it, for it was the first time that anyone in Lataifa had attempted an enterprise similar to mine–to enter my imagination and look at my situation as it might appear to me" (Ghosh, *Antique* 121).

The Non-Familiar Other

Next to familiarities, it is also possible to find othering. By othering, I mean when the Self speaks for the Other, depicts and represents the Other, the dialogue is inexistent, the Other is silenced, and the concept of familiarity disappears. Regarding the manifestations of othering, Ghosh repeats the same exploration he did on familiarity. In some sense, Amitab "is anthropologized by locals rather than the other way round; his language, customs, and cultural practices are defamiliarized by the contempt and incredulity of his supposed subjects of study" (Chambers 6). Sometimes, he is placed by the villagers in the position of the subaltern periphery or at the Center of power, and sometimes, it is Ghosh who places himself in those positions, thus deconstructing the fixity of representation. Clarice Chambers considers Ghosh "self-conscious about the ambiguity of his standing amongst the villagers, acknowledging his privileged position as an anthropologist from that center of Western academe, Oxford University, as well as his low status as a Hindu in Egypt" (7).

Contrasting with the previous teacher (Ustaz Sabry) who considered Amitab through the logic of familiarity, another local teacher from the village gives Amitab the position of a subaltern Other. This teacher reproduces the stereotypical representation of India. Using Said's words, we could say that he *Orientalizes* India. He tells Amitab: "I have read all about India. There is a lot of chilies in the food and when a man dies his wife is dragged away and burnt alive. And of course, you have Indira Gandhi and her son Sanjay Gandhi, who used to sterilize the Muslims" (Ghosh, *Antique* 31).

Hinduism is a constant reason for the villagers to place Amitab in the position of the uncivilized Other. Specifically, the villagers ask Amitab about two Hindu practices repeatedly: "the burning of the dead" and "the worship of the cows." "Is it true what they say about you? That in your country people burn their dead?" (99) someone asks Amitab. It is worth noting that "you" is used as a synonym for "your country." Generalization is part of the strategy of othering. The question turns immediately into aggression: "Why do they do it? Don't they know it's wrong? You have to put a stop to it. You should try to civilize your people… You should tell them to stop praying to cows and burning their dead…Is there no Law or Morality in your country: can everyone do as they please?" (99, 165). These questions must have been repeated to Ghosh many times, considering that he included it four times in the text.[5]

Amitab is his country, and they do not want to change the representation they have created about Amitab and his country. They are essentializing Amitab; they are explaining to him how Indian society works and, at the same time, judging his culture with their own transmitted and infinitely repeated representations. And they never let Amitab explain much; dialogue is denied, and he thus becomes *the silent Other*. The villagers insist that if he doesn't want to do something to change the way the people live in his country, at least he should change himself: "Stay here and become a Muslim and marry a girl from the village" (139).

Srimati Basu believes that Ghosh includes this dialogue in his text as it allows him to make "explicit the tedium and frustration of having to explain the particularities of one's culture to those who have already made up their minds about it based on selective representations" (208).

For the villagers, Amitab needs to leave behind his primitive practices. “You will see then how much better Islam is than this *Hinduki* of yours. I am hoping that you will convert and become a Muslim” (34). However, Ghosh avoids giving the image that all the villagers despise him for being Hindu. He does not generalize this othering. Not all the villagers try to convert him. Minutes later, one of them tries to stand in Amitab’s shoes and asks him with the true intention of hearing him: “‘Tell me, would your father be upset if you were to change your religion…’ ‘I don’t know’,” answers Amitab. “Well, it wouldn’t be right for you to upset your father. That is true,” concludes the friend (35).

Ghosh exposes the strategy of othering and then depicts the opposite behavior, a villager allowing the Other to speak. The villager listens and then changes his mind. His conclusion could be that maybe being a Muslim is not the best for everyone.

Ghosh registers different forms of relations between him and the villagers. Sometimes, he is seen as part of the family, and at others, as an alien; sometimes, they see him as a savage, and at times, as more civilized. Also, Amitab's perception of the villagers changes. Sometimes, he feels familiarity, while at others, he depicts them as superstitious and irrational.

One day, Jabir, one of the young villagers, asks Amitab what he knows about sex. But he uses a word (a slang term) that Amitab does not understand. So, he tells Jabir that he does not know what the word is. But Jabir assumes that what Amitab is saying is that he doesn’t know what sex is. Here, we find a translation problem. They are not communicating with each other. Later, Jabir mocks Amitab in this regard among his friends. Amitab hears this conversation, but now he gets the word’s meaning through intuition. But Jabir extends his previous judgment and tells his friends that Amitab doesn’t know anything: “not religion, not politics, not sex, just like a child” (45).

The comparison Jabir makes between Amitab and a child is not innocent. For Ashis Nandy, colonialism has colonized minds, and thus, the West is not just a geopolitical concept but also a psychological category. “Colonialism dutifully picked up these ideas of growth and development and drew a new parallel between primitivism and childhood” (15). If the British were the adults–the developed subject–then the Indians were the children. According to Nandy, there were two forms of this underdeveloped subject for the British: the childlike Indian and the childish Indian. Both are innocent and ignorant, but the childish can be reformed and modernized; and the childlike is incorrigible, unpredictable, and unwilling to learn (15, 56). For Jabir, Amitab belongs to this second class of childish adults.

There are two other situations in which the villagers laugh at Amitab's customs. But, at the same time as the boys laugh about Amitab's primitiveness, Ghosh (the writer) exposes (to the reader) the villagers' primitiveness. The first situation is when Jabir, "pointing a finger at his crotch" asks Amitab if he doesn't shave there. Amitab said no. But then, Jabir cried, "Doesn't the hair grow longer and longer until..." (*Antique* 43). Amitab tells us that "inadvertently, Jabir's eyes dropped, and he stole a quick look at my ankles. I am convinced, to this day, that he fully expected to see the ends of two long, curly braids peeping out from the ends of my trousers" (44). In the second situation, *the boys* asked Amitab if, in his country, women were "purified" (clitoridectomy). "No", he answers, "women in my country are not purified." And the boys replied: "So you mean you let the clitoris just grow and grow?" (166).

On both occasions, they view Amitab as someone closer to a savage, less civilized in their criteria, in both cases, for not cutting something. At the same time, on both occasions, Ghosh (the writer) gives the reader the necessary tools to determine who is the "real" savage, who has superstitious or unscientific thought. At the end of the scene, the reader feels that the one who was laughing about the beliefs and customs of others was Ghosh. As we said before, Amitab never places the Egyptians in a subaltern position, at least not openly. Amitab (the character) thus seems very politically correct, but Ghosh (the author) seems much less so, exposing the Egyptian boys' simplicity with absurd humor. In these situations, Amitab is not laughing *with* the Egyptian; Ghosh is laughing with the reader *about* the Egyptian *boys*. It could be considered an expression of pure othering, the perfect reproduction of the strategy of Western domination: the villagers, who have childish, naïve, superstitious, and traditional minds, and Ghosh who have an adult, scientific, and progressive mind. But Ghosh included expressions of familiarity with other men from the village, like Khamees, who reminded him of the people who would hang around the coffee houses in Calcutta. Thus, Ghosh presents himself in a more complex dimension as someone who, while aware of the strategy of Western domination, cannot decolonize his mind. Later, in Amitab's discussion with the Imam, we see Amitab consciously using colonialist logic. This scene is the climax of Amitab's position as a subaltern. Khamees wants Amitab to ask the Imam about some traditional medicine he needs but is reluctant to approach him. Khamees tells him, "he'll come if you ask him—he knows you're a foreigner. He'll listen to you" (191). Khamees's claim, that the narrator's foreignness makes him worthy of attention, is undermined by the fact that in many frustrating encounters, people do not listen to Amitab at all. Amitab knows that he belongs to the wrong kind of foreignness. The Imam and

Amitab, knew that "a westernized Indian, it was assumed by the good Samaritans, would be a better Indian than the one who was immured in his tradition, but he would never be the same as the European" (Madan 152).

Nevertheless, Amitab reaches the Imam, and the conversation quickly develops into a heated exchange. The Imam criticizes the burning of the dead and the worship of the cows. He repeats the same condemnations: "Can't you see that it's a *primitive* and *backward* custom? Are you *savages* that permit something like that?" (*Antique* 192, emphasis added). But the Imam this time uses a new argument, which is not explained by religion but through the logic of modernity: "'How will your country ever progress if you carry on doing these things? You've even been to Europe; you've seen how advanced they are. Now tell me: have you ever seen them burning their dead?' 'Yes, they do burn their dead in Europe'", Amitab said, "they have special electric furnaces meant just for that." The Imam laughed and said to the crowd, "He's lying, they don't burn their dead in the West. They are not an ignorant people. They're advanced, they're educated, they have science, they have guns and tanks and bombs" (192-3).

And here the debate reaches its full absurdity. "We have them too!" Amitab shouted back at him. "In my country, we have all those things too; we have guns and tanks and bombs. And they're better than anything you've got in Egypt–we're a long way ahead of you." "He's lying", cried the Imam, "our guns and bombs are much better than theirs. Ours are second only to the West's." "It's you who is lying," Amitab said. "You know nothing about this. Ours are much better. Why, in my country, we've even had a nuclear explosion. You won't be able to match that even in a hundred years" (193).

The Imam and Amitab, both coming from lands that were home to ancient civilizations, compete to establish a prior claim to the technology of modern violence. Ghosh reflects on this point: "At that moment, despite the vast gap that lay between us, we understood each other perfectly. We were both traveling, he and I: we were traveling in the West" (193).

This is the only time in the whole text that Amitab explicitly tries to locate himself in a superior position to one of the locals. Suddenly, the strategy of othering relocates them in a familiar space: both were reproducing the logic of violence developed by Western civilization. Regarding this scene, Scott considers that "'West' for them both is a kind of shared imaginary, a place elsewhere but producing its allure everywhere, which informs, indeed constitutes the nature of their relationship with each other" (82). They were assuming the same language in which the issues of superiority and higher civilization were merely reduced to military power. "It was the only language we had been able to discover in common," says Amitab, and then adds: "For millions and millions of people on the landmasses around us, the West meant only this– science and tanks and guns and bombs" (193). They expressed a kind of familiarity through a stereotypical representation of the West as if this was the only field in which real values could finally be measured: the logic of violence, which determines where the Center and the Periphery are. We have better weapons, so we are closer to the Center, making you my subaltern and I your superior. Samuel Huntington–who sustains that post-Cold War conflicts are not ideological anymore, but cultural and religious exclusively–affirms that "the West won the world not by the superiority of its ideas or values or religion, but rather by its superiority in applying organized violence. Westerners often forget this fact; non-Westerners never do" (51).

But then Amitab tells us (the readers) that *the only difference* between him and the Imam was that he "had been in there [in the West]" (Ghosh, *Antique* 193). It seems they are talking the same language. But the Imam can only talk about the West through representations. Amitab is in a different position: he can play the game of talking through stereotypes, but he also knows the West firsthand. Hence, he let us know that beyond the stereotypical representation he is using with the Imam, he could have told the Imam about the West's "libraries, its museums, its theatres" (193).

We find a previous version of the discussion quoted above in the essay, *The Imam and the Indian*, written four years before *In an Antique Land*. In this version, instead of museums and libraries, Amitab says that he could have told the Imam about "the ancient English university I had won a scholarship to, about punk dons with safety pins in their mortarboards, about superhighways and sex shops and Picasso" (Ghosh, *The Imam* 11). In other words, he could have mentioned how deep his knowledge of the many complexities of Western culture was. In this first version, he includes heterogeneous things, describing the West through four postcards. We can assume that he spent quite a lot of time thinking about these elements. It was not an easy task for someone who is trying to avoid essentializing the *Other*. He doesn't want to be seen as someone reproducing the European strategy of *orientalizing* in the other direction.

The "ancient" English University is the highest authoritative knowledge that Ghosh is invoking. He does not only know about this University, but he even tells us that he belongs to it because he "won a scholarship." He is not the tail of the lion; he is very close to the head. The use of the adjective "ancient," works as an opposition to the super-highways. He knows about Europe's "ancient" knowledge and the highly technological achievements in the present. The

West has a living past, *the University*, a developed present, *the superhighways*, and magnificent artists, like *Picasso*. But what is the West without sex? "Sex shops" expresses in one line the relation between capitalism and desire.

In the later version, Amitab gives the reader the image of someone who wants to tell the Imam exclusively about the high culture: *museums, libraries, theatres*. He avoids giving a full image of the West and focuses on what he thinks is the most valuable gift the West has given the world. He needed something valuable as a counterpoint to the other West's gift. Thus, the West is Tanks, Guns, Bombs, Museums, Libraries, and Theatres. In sum: War and Arts. The best and the worst of Western civilization.

Establishing representations of the *Other* as an inferior subject is not an exclusive prerogative of the West. Ghosh focuses his energy on an investigation, less about the Other than about his relations with those Others. It is in this context that familiarity emerges. The sensation that there is a possibility of communicating and establishing relations, the feeling of brotherhood–postcolonial, generational, or emotional brotherhood–and the idea of belonging to a common experience emerges. Thus, he juxtaposes this familiarity with the process of othering. Ghosh distances himself from the past travelers who developed a more dominant translation of the Other. "Ghosh rejects any single historical or anthropological account's claim to provide an authentic and complete version of the Other" (Chambers 17). Amitab is placed in different hierarchies on the axis of subalternity/hegemony. Sometimes, he belongs to a primitive and savage culture as a Hindu; sometimes, he shares the *same but different* colonized past and postcolonial present; and sometimes, he is the representative of Western ("superior") knowledge as an Oxford scholar. Ghosh knows (and he could have told the Imam) that Western Civilization's gifts are not only tanks, guns, and bombs but also museums, libraries, and theatres. Ghosh knows that the civilization that produced the Enlightenment had great achievements, but he seems to suspect that they are not enough to counteract the West's violence. Or at least that all those museums and theatres did very little to reduce the sacrificial side of modernity. Ghosh focuses on the violence that emerges from the dichotomous opposition, *us* and *them*, and proposes to counteract it by avoiding the creation of fixed representations of the Other by discovering those common experiences—"those *shared-but-different* histories and *shared-but-different* identities" (Scott 83)—with the Other; and, as Amitab felt Nabeel did, by entering the imagination and looking at the situation of the Other as if he was one of them (Ghosh, *Antique*

121). In the next part of this article, we will see how, for Bolaño, the *horror* of colonialism is intermingled in intricate complicity with the Enlightenment.

Writing Poetry is Barbaric

Theodor Adorno’s famous phrase, “Writing poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” (34), alludes to the impossibility of expressing through words, in any existing language, the atrocities committed by Nazism. This necessarily makes us believe that writing poetry before Auschwitz was not barbaric, that there was a moment in Europe in which poetry could be devoted to praise its civilized aspects and to build verbal monuments to that culture. Not anymore, Adorno seems to say, regarding the idea of the concentration camps. He does not consider the previous barbaric dimensions of European Culture. This is a tendency in the Eurocentric perspective of the Frankfurt School. If Enlightenment, for Adorno and Horkheimer, was the attempt to master nature, the twentieth century ended up mastering nature and humans, with the Jews being the objectified subject, “existing merely for the exercise of power” (Adorno and Horkheimer 137-38). As Jews living during the Second World War, Adorno and Horkheimer were forced to experience the dehumanizing possibilities of Enlightenment, its sacrificial side. Nevertheless, they still believed that there was a moment in which the Enlightenment did not need to sacrifice any *Other*. They felt they were living at a turning point that could be modified: “If Enlightenment does not assimilate reflection on this regressive moment, it seals its fate” (Adorno and Horkheimer xvi).

Jürgen Habermas has the same Eurocentric perspective regarding the crisis that he believes Enlightenment faced. If, at some moment, it was felt that through Enlightenment it would be possible to achieve progress in morality, justice in social institutions, and even human happiness, Habermas tells us that “little of this optimism remains to us in the twentieth century” (45). Nevertheless, he still asks: “Should we continue to hold fast to the intentions of the Enlightenment, however, fractured they may be, or should we rather relinquish the entire project of modernity?” (46). His answer leaves no doubts: “I believe that we should learn from the aberrations which have accompanied the project of modernity and from the mistakes of those extravagant proposals of sublation, rather than abandoning modernity and its project” (51). For Habermas, the program of modernity has not yet been fulfilled, but do we want to fulfill it? Who would benefit from its fulfilment?

Frankfurt School's idea that the Enlightenment ended mastering humans and transforming the Jews into an objectified subject, made it possible for the Palestinian Edward Said to envision another sacrificial subject of modernity: the oriental Other. Said considers that the Enlightenment's sacrifice began with the British Empire. Therefore, if Jews were the internal Other of Europe, for Said the *oriental subject* was the external Other of Europe. For the Argentinian theorist Enrique Dussel, the sacrifice started at the very beginning of Modernity, with the "discovery" of America.[6] Actually, for Dussel, Modernity always required a sacrificial Other (49). From his perspective, Modernity just modified the arguments for carrying out the sacrifices of different *Others*. That seems to be the unconscious strategy of the Enlightenment: finding justifications for the West's *humanitarian* domination. For Dussel, the task is to deny the innocence of modernity and to reveal the face of all those negated *Others*, victims of irrational acts justified by the needs of the Center of Power. Thus, the concept of the Other reaches all those subjects which are deemed inferior by the Eurocentric modern worldview; a worldview that has its birth in the first written descriptions of the inhabitants of the *New World* (Lander 16). From this perspective, Habermas's intentions to complete the modern project seem doomed from the outset. In other words, did the Enlightenment—the great achievements of Western Civilization (the *libraries, museums, and theatres*) —reach a more humane understanding of humanity?

In the following pages, we are going to see through Roberto Bolaño's fiction the complex relationship between high culture and horror and his answer to George Steiner's questions:

> What good did high humanism do to the oppressed mass of the community? What use was it when barbarism came? What immortal poem has ever stopped or mitigated political terror–though a number have celebrated it? Do those for whom a great poem, a philosophic design, a theorem, are, in the final reckoning, the supreme value, not help the throwers of napalm by looking away, by cultivating in themselves a stance of objective sadness or historical relativism? (86).

The Enlightenment's Hidden Horror

In Bolaño's *Nocturno de Chile*, we find a priest-critic who preferred to seclude himself in the reading of the Greek classics to avoid seeing the massacres carried out in the streets during Pinochet's coup. This behavior–masking the horror behind *humanism*–is not exclusive to

European civilization. That strategy, undoubtedly–and Bolaño is aware of this–has also been replicated in Latin America. The highest achievements of Western civilization and *the horror* generated by this same civilization is a zero-sum game for Bolaño. Even less than zero. As Felipe Müller, a character in *Los detectives salvajes,* says, "If you mix the sublime and the sinister, what you end up with is sinister. Right?" (450, my trans.). In the light of Bolaño's work, Müller's sentence acquires multiple perspectives. That sentence can be considered the matrix of most of Bolaño's work (or at least, one of the multiple matrixes found in his work).[7] In this sense, we can read most of Bolaño's work as a vast text, which transforms the sentence pronounced by Müller into a longer periphrasis of it.

The axiom *Sublime* + *Sinister* = *Sinister* follows the logic of the Latin axiom *Si inæqualibus æqualia addas, omnia erunt inæqualia*. This axiom–which means *if you add inequality to the equal, the result is unequal*–was used by Francis Bacon in *The Advancement of Learning* (2nd book, 4.3). There he develops his idea of *philosophia prima*, a universal science that would systematize everything. It was the beginning of the seventeenth century, and Bacon already associated traditional knowledge with a childhood of humanity compared to the maturity humans could reach through science. The empirical observation was the key for him. Regarding Bacon's philosophy, Horkheimer and Adorno conclude that "for the Enlightenment, anything which cannot be resolved into numbers, and ultimately into one, is illusion" (4). Hence, an axiom that works in mathematics for Bacon should work also for justice: "Is there not a true coincidence between commutative and distributive justice, and arithmetical and geometrical proportion?" (2nd book, 5.3). He believed in a parallel progression between the empirical knowledge of nature and humans that would take humanity to a higher state. Many years later, Rabindranath Tagore, without rejecting the contributions of the Enlightenment, would clarify Bacon's confusion: "By knowing the laws of the material universe you do not change your deeper humanity" (70). The good intentions that Bacon saw attached to his *universal science* were not intrinsic to it. According to Adorno and Horkheimer, reason is merely a tool for calculation, planning, and coordination without any inherent moral value or purpose (69). Tagore calls our intellect "an ascetic who wears no clothes, takes no food, knows no sleep, has no wishes, feels no love or hatred or pity for human limitations, who only reasons, unmoved through the vicissitudes of life" (47). How did a philosophy that aimed for the freedom of humanity get monopolized by a group to *rationally* perpetuate its privileges? Bolaño explains its flaw: coupling the sublime with the sinister is the distinctive mark of Civilization. Literature is the result of that sum. In Bolaño's novel *Nocturno* *de Chile*, María Canales says, "That is how literature is made in Chile" (Bolaño, *By Night* 115).[8] The character of María Canales is based on a real person, Mariana Callejas, an amateur anti-Marxist short-story writer. During Pinochet's dictatorship, she organized literary meetings with the most select group of artists of the time. Despite the ocean of darkness in which the nation was sinking, they managed to sustain the lights of art, the best of civilization, and the torch of the Enlightenment. While they recited verses of Eliot, Proust, or Faulkner and poured whisky over the soft carpets of the living room, Mariana Callejas's husband, Michael Townley–an agent of both the CIA and the DINA–was torturing men in the basement. The poets, writers, and artists partying above never knew about the horror beneath them. One day, one of the guests, looking for the toilet, got lost in one of the house's corridors:

> …was a theorist of avant-garde theater, a theorist with a great sense of humor, who didn't panic when he lost his way, since as well as having a great sense of humor he was naturally curious, and when he realized he was lost in María Canales's basement, he wasn't afraid … and finally he came to the very last room at the end of the basement's narrowest corridor, lit by a single, feeble light bulb, and he opened the door and saw the man tied to the metal bed, blindfolded, and he knew the man was alive because he could hear him breathing, although he wasn't in good shape, for in spite of the dim light he saw the wounds, the raw patches, like eczema, but it wasn't eczema, the battered parts of his anatomy, the swollen parts, as if more than one bone had been broken, but he was breathing, he certainly didn't look like he was about to die, and then the theorist of avant-garde theater shut the door delicately, without making a noise, and started to make his way back to the sitting room, carefully switching off as he went each of the lights he had previously switched on (*By Night* 110).

As opposed to most of the fictional testimonies written about the dictatorship centered on the victims, in *Nocturno de Chile,* the narrator is Sebastián Urrutia Lacroix, a conservative priest and literary critic who supported the coup.[9] Reaching his last days, he is tormented by a past he is not able to remove from his memory. The episode of María Canales's house takes centrality in his confession. It is one of the stains remaining in his guiltless consciousness. And the priest-critic accepts that there is no solution, repeating the words of María Canales: "That is how literature is made in Chile, but not just in Chile, in Argentina and Mexico too, in Guatemala and Uruguay, in Spain and France and Germany, in green England and carefree Italy. That is how literature is made. Or at least what we call literature, to keep ourselves from falling into the rubbish dump" (115-6).

The house is the metaphor, the vanishing point between civilization and barbarism. On the upper floor is a self that celebrates civilization, the classic heritage of humanism, supported by a basement, an uncontainable *id,* that repeats barbarism. In an ideal world, the house is the symbol of protection from external uncontrollable forces, in this case, the house is both protection from external forces and home to those brutal forces. Gaston Bachelard, in his *The Poetics of Space,* says that before man is "cast into the world…man is laid in the cradle of the house. And always, in our daydreams, the house is a large cradle" (7). In the nightmare that this house becomes, the cradle, the bed, is electrified and thus becomes the coffin. For Bachelard, every space in the house has a different symbolism and works as a metaphor for our psyche. The cellar "is first and foremost the dark entity of the house, the one that partakes of subterranean forces. … the irrationality of the depths" (18). On the upper floors, instead, "we are in the rational zone of intellectualized projects" (18). No matter how many lights "our civilization" installs in the basement, Bachelard is clear: "the unconscious cannot be civilized" (39).

The impossibility of being perfectly civilized haunts the priest-critic. "Is there a solution?" (Bolaño *By Night* 116) he asks many years after participating in María Canales's dinners, a stain that poetry's purity cannot redeem. "Is there a solution?" asks the ghost of a young man who is his youth or Bolaño's youth. The priest-critic replies to his ghost: "That is how literature is made; that is how the great works of Western literature are made. You better get used to it" (116).

The living room is where civilization is celebrated, and the basement is where horror is hidden; that is how the great works of Western literature are made. The European distinction between the civilized and the barbarian has been used precisely to hide the barbaric dimensions of the civilizing mission; barbarism is not a deviation of Enlightenment–as the Frankfurt School wanted to believe–instead, it is where it is sustained.

Bolaño explores the zones where the post-Enlightenment mission failed to achieve a more rational and humanist coexistence and instead reached its opposite: pure barbarism. Our culture, Bolaño seems to tell us, is so deeply related to violence that we cannot separate its civilizing dimension from the barbaric ones. For Ignacio López, "stripped of its civilizing aura, literature can help force us to observe the darkest and most savage dimensions of every culture, the vanishing point where the borders between civilization and barbarism are blurred" (211, my trans.).

María Canales's house is the spatial reunion of art and torture, the vanishing point that blurs those borders. The priest-critic symbolizes that vanishing point in one subject, gathering in himself the sublime and the sinister of Western civilization.

The priest-critic was fearful during the first half of 1970 (just before Allende was elected president). The order in which he used to live is on the verge of change. The hierarchies that provide him privileges are now shaken. And he demands sanity: "This is no time to go chasing rainbows, I said, but to be a patriot. … Have Chileans gone mad? … Then came the elections and Allende won" (Bolaño, *By Night* 73-4). From that moment on, the priest-critic feels that uncontrollable forces have been unleashed and the country's inhabitants have become irrational. In a situation like this, he decides to reread the Greek Classics: "Let God's will be done, I said. I am going to reread the Greeks. Respecting the tradition, I started with Homer…" (74). Then, he alternates the narration of Allende's government–as a spiral upwards of chaos–with the narration of his reading of the Classics. Reading the classics helps the priest-critic protect himself from the unrest the country is experiencing. He uses the Greek classics, not to apply their knowledge to his current situation, but more like an elusive drug; he carried on thus until the *order* was restored:

> I also reread Demosthenes, Menander, Aristotle, and Plato (whom one cannot read too often), and there were strikes, and the colonel of a tank regiment tried to mount a coup… there were riots, swearing, Chileans blaspheming, painting on walls, and then nearly half a million people marched in support of Allende; then came the coup d'état, the putsch, the military uprising, the bombing of La Moneda, and when the bombing was finished, the president committed suicide and that put an end to it all. I sat there in silence, a finger between the pages to mark my place, and I thought: Peace at last (75-6).

The *order* he could only find through the words of the Greeks has finally fallen over the country. His lack of acceptance of the revolutionary process led by Allende, as a manifestation of an unconscious irrationality–Chileans were *dreaming of rainbows*–found its exact opposite in his acceptance of the coup, as the restoration of the order, which he also labels as a dream, but like those in which acceptance is the norm (99).

The priest-critic understands the unrestrained use of violence by the dictatorship as the *necessary means* to restore order. In this respect, he conceives this *necessity* not as his subjective option but as that of the people. Paradoxically, through most of the novel, the character of the priest-critic shows disdain for the country's inhabitants: "So few of us are truly cultured in this godforsaken country. The rest are completely ignorant" (98). It is a common attitude in Chile that the priest-critic uses to highlight the border between him and the "others", an attitude that becomes necessary when the differences blur. Nevertheless, when he needs to justify the brutality of the Pinochet regime, he joins the mass of Chileans he previously scorned and tries to present his brutality as a collective need. If, at the beginning of his narration (before the coup), he distinguishes himself from the other Chileans: "I am a reasonable man. I have always been a reasonable man" (4), after the coup, everyone seemed to be reasonable men:

> At the end of the day, we were all reasonable … we were all Chileans; we were all normal, discreet, logical, balanced, careful, sensible people; we all knew that something had to be done, that certain things were necessary, there's a time for sacrifice and a time for reasoning. … So, I went out into the street and breathed the air of Santiago with the vague conviction that I was living, if not in the best of worlds, at least in a possible world, a real world, and I published a book of poems… (94-5).

In this paragraph, Bolaño depicts the priest-critic's rationality formidably. He connects the violent imposition of a new order with the priest's creative impulse to write poetry. He also mentions the necessity of justifying any form of violence.

In the State of Exception, Giorgio Agamben defines this institution (which also vanishes the borders between civilization and barbarism) "as the legal form of what cannot have the legal form" (1).[10] To conceive in the Law the figure of the State of Exception is to accept that, in certain occasions, democracy can be sacrificed in the name of democracy. Thus, the Law stipulates a situation where all Laws can be put aside. The State of Exception is not a relic from absolutist regimes. On the contrary, it is a democratic conception that defines the threshold between democracy and absolutism (5). The priest-critic conceives the nation's necessity for a coup as something reasonable and a collective desire. But necessity is always a subjective judgment. Agamben says, "The only circumstances that are necessary and objective are those that are declared to be so" (5).

On the day of the coup, the self-proclaimed Junta issued a decree–*Decreto Ley no. 1*, with the validity of a Law–in which they *declare* that they "assume the Supreme Command of the Nation with the patriotic commitment to restore Chileanness, justice and the broken institutional framework…" (Junta Militar, *D.L.1*, my trans.). They also guaranteed to respect the Constitution and the Laws of the Republic "to the extent that the current situation of the country allows it..." (*D.L.1*). In this last sentence, we can see that the Junta leaves a space–inside their first law-format-decree–in which they assume that the law can be put aside if needed. It is a remarkable example of the aporia mentioned by Agamben: the possibility of law's suspension contained in the law. The State of Exception is not a weakness of the system, is not a juridical *lacuna* that can be fixed; on the contrary, it is "the–secret and truer–life of the law" (*Agamben* 70).

On that same September 11, the Junta also issued the *Bando N° 5*, in which they proclaimed that the *reasons* that had moved them to assume "the moral duty to remove the previous President" were that Allende's government "had committed serious illegality demonstrated by violating the fundamental rights of freedom of expression, academic freedom, the right to strike, right to petition, right to property, and general right to a dignified and safe life" (*Bando N°5*, my trans.).

Hence, the Junta can precisely justify breaking the fundamental rights of freedom of expression, academic freedom, the right to strike, the right to petition, the property right, and the general right to a dignified and safe life to recover them all. The rational sacrifice of every humanist idea conceived since the Enlightenment to preserve them. Following Agamben's ideas, the relevance of the documents quoted is that all the violence unleashed in Chile by the Pinochet regime does not escape from the possibilities of the law; it is precisely one of its primary mechanisms to achieve or recover *the desired order*. But who declares when it becomes necessary to suspend all laws and–invoking the defense of reason in doing so–use unrestrained violence?

Humanism at the Service of Dehumanization

It is fundamental at this point to mention that all this critique of specific hidden aspects of post-Enlightenment rationalism does not imply a rejection of rationalism. It would be a mistake to understand rationalism as an exclusively European paradigm. This critique aims to highlight the violence used in applying its humanist principles. Dipesh Chakrabarty acknowledges that even European historians and intellectuals recognize "the fact that one is often ushered into modernity as much through violence as through persuasion" (27). Chakrabarty considers that it is dangerous to believe that a critique of post-Enlightenment rationalism can only emerge from a fascist perspective. As a counterexample, he lists critics of post-Enlightenment rationalism who could not be considered fascist, such as Gandhi, Weber, and Foucault: "These thinkers remind us that to critique post-Enlightenment rationalism or even modernity, is not to fall into some kind of irrationalism" (37). Chakrabarty does not reject the Enlightenment, but those practices implemented by Europe in the name of the Enlightenment, which ultimately did not humanize. If we refuse to look for new answers to humanize humanity if post-Enlightenment rationalism is the only way, then Chakrabarty is right to sustain that "we ought to be grateful that the Europeans set out to dominate the world and spread its message" (32).

In *Nocturno de Chile*, there is a scene that transforms the principles of Enlightenment into its opposite. The priest-critic is contacted by two mysterious men, Mr Etah and Mr Raef (Hate and Fear, spelt backwards), who order him to give lessons on Marxism to the Junta. Later, Pinochet explains to the priest-critic that he wants to learn about Marxism "to understand Chile's enemies, to find out how they think, to get an idea of how far they are prepared to go" (Bolaño, *By Night* 92). While the priest-critic reads to avoid reality, Pinochet wants to learn to understand his reality. In this sense, Pinochet would be a better example of what an intellectual should be. However, there is a difference in Pinochet's motivation for learning. It is not humanism but the opposite. As Bolivian writer Edmundo Paz Soldán accurately remarks regarding this scene: "The transmission of knowledge serves to eliminate the citizens who do not think like the lettered dictator. Literature, which used to prepare people to join civilization, has been distorted and is now an instrument for barbarism" ("Introducción" 16, my trans.).

The lectures that the priest-critic gave to Pinochet and the rest of the Junta, far from making them better human beings, provided them with the required intellectual knowledge to become more efficient in exterminating human beings. Can there be a better example of applying the post-Enlightenment methods to achieve the opposite goal?

On one occasion, the only student to show up for class was Pinochet. The priest-critic holds a dialogue with him, revealing to us how hard Pinochet tries to be seen as an intellectual. It would be easier to imagine Pinochet as a beast who could only satisfy his thirst for blood through mass murder. It would be easier to think that the dictatorship was sustained exclusively by irrational and violent monsters. Far from that, his accomplices were transversal: lawyers gave legal and rational justification for the unjustifiable; economists implanted a new rational model as if experimenting with lab rats; and doctors gave their knowledge to check how much electricity a body could resist before dying. In this distorted world, where human knowledge is not in a quarrel with violence and human extermination–but instead promotes it and perfects it–it is not strange that someone like Pinochet tried hard to be seen as an intellectual, as someone who loved books and wrote them. In both the novel and in real life, he did not want to be remembered as a dictator but as a statesman, someone with profound knowledge of history and geopolitics, as a man of both arms and letters. His problems began when he studied at the Academy of War, where he needed to study twice as much as the rest to obtain average marks. Then, he began developing an inferiority complex with strong consequences. His books–full of plagiarism–were meaningless.

The story of Pinochet's intellectual intrigues is exposed by the journalist Juan Cristóbal Peña in an investigation called *La secreta vida literaria de Augusto Pinochet*. Peña describes the hard efforts Pinochet made to be considered an intellectual and how much he suffered–and made others suffer–because of the contempt that the people around him had for his intellectual capacities. One of these stories is regarding the death of General Carlos Prats. He, unlike Pinochet, had a brilliant career at the Academy and did not support the coup. In 1974, General Prats and his wife were murdered. A bomb was placed in their car. They were living in exile in Argentina. The whole scheme was orchestrated by the DINA, by direct order of Pinochet, using the facilities that the Condor Operation–that brotherhood of Latin American dictators–made possible. The man who placed the bomb was Michael Townley, Mariana Callejas's husband. He went inside Prats's garage, put the bomb under the car, and pressed the remote button, which blew up their vehicle with them in it.

Not long before the killing, Prats published an article about geopolitics, "a subject on which Pinochet was supposed to be an expert" (Peña 29, my trans.). The media consultant remembers "how the general's face [Pinochet's] became gradually more upset as he read. And he did not get very far. A few paragraphs were enough for the general to release an unpleasant shout and throw the publication into the air. Pinochet had damned Carlos Prats" (29).

Pinochet was not afraid that Prats could put his power at risk. He felt that Prats exposed his intellectual limitations. Pinochet probably felt that Prats would always be considered a better intellectual no matter how much power he could seize. Peña believes that this jealousy was probably incubated long before Pinochet took power, probably for years or an entire lifetime, until it became an incurable resentment: "Prats could talk about military feats and barracks anecdotes as well as literature, art, and politics. He had broad knowledge that laid Pinochet's deficiencies bare, not just to political leaders, but also to his very comrades in arms" (33).

In this case, literature is not deployed to hide *the horror*; instead, it is the cause of *the horror*. Bolaño did explore this possibility in *Estrella distante*, specifically regarding the character Carlos Wieder, poet, and torturer. However, in *Nocturno de Chile*, Pinochet's ambitions to be seen as an intellectual had another consequence for the priest-critic's self-consideration as an intellectual. The priest narrates to Farewell–a character inspired in Alone, the Supreme Critic of Chile during most of the twentieth century, a fervent anti-communist and Neruda's friend–the conversation he had when he first met Pinochet with no one else around. The general asked the priest if he thought Allende was an intellectual, and then he told the priest:

> Everyone's presenting him as a martyr and an intellectual now … But he wasn't an intellectual unless you can call someone who doesn't read or study an intellectual… And what do you think Allende used to read? … Magazines. All he read was magazines. Summaries of books. Articles his followers used to cut out for him. … How many books do you think I've written? … Three. I wrote them all on my own, three books, one of them quite a thick book, with no help. … Why do you think I'm telling you all this? … To avoid any misunderstanding. So you know I'm an avid reader; I read books about history and political theory and even read novels (Bolaño, *By Night* 89-91).

The priest-critic feels uncomfortable. He must accept and praise every comment Pinochet makes without hesitation. When the priest hears about Pinochet's books, he expresses an exaggerated enthusiasm: "What a surprising news, what a remarkable news … It is fantastic, three books … how gladly I would read some of your books" (91). But then he asks Farewell as if he were confessing a sin to his superior father: "Did I do my duty, or did I go beyond it?" And Farewell replied with another question: "Was it a necessary or an unnecessary course of action? Necessary, necessary, necessary, I said" (92).

Again, the priest-critic's sacrifice of his intellectual principles is justified through the invocation of *necessity*—both Pinochet and the priest-critic try to hide their barbarism under a mantle of intellectualism. According to Paz Soldán, in *Nocturno de Chile,* "there is a vision of the critic as a courtesan of authoritarian power and of literature as an artistic vocation that attempts to maintain its distance from barbarism, but which is instead an accomplice of that barbarism" (Paz Soldán, "El artista", my trans.).

The Way Out of the Corridor

Amid darkness, light persists.

Gandhi, 1931

At the end of this article, we will attempt to find the exit from Bolaño's journey to the edge of the abyss. A few years before dying, Bolaño was invited for dinner at Diamela Eltit's house during one of his visits to Chile. Eltit, a writer and one of the founders of the neo-avant-garde and anti-Pinochet collective, CADA (Colectivo de Acción de Arte–Art Action Collective), was at that time the partner of a Socialist minister, the government spokesman. Bolaño wrote about it in "The Corridor with No Apparent Way Out", a text included in the collection of essays and articles *Between Parentheses.*

Even though the text has no divisions, it can be divided into four parts. In the first part, Bolaño describes his uneasiness with the absence of bodyguards or police security outside the house, considering that a Socialist minister lived there. He is paranoid that a gang of Nazis will enter the house at any moment and kill the minister, Bolaño's wife, and his son. When Bolaño asks the minister as to what if the Nazis were to come. The minister tells him calmly: "I hope they don't" (Bolaño, *Between Parentheses* 76).

The second part of the text is dedicated to literary workshops. The romance between the Socialist minister and Eltit started when he attended one of her literary workshops. Then Bolaño imagines a scene from the Eighteenth century, in which the minister slowly courted the writer. Bolaño narrates the end of that dinner and does not mention Eltit's novels or CADA.

But the text still needs to be finished. The third part is dedicated–seemingly out of the blue–to Pedro Lemebel, "One of Chile's best writers and the best poet of my generation, though he doesn't write poetry" (81). Eltit also belonged to the same generation. Then Bolaño praises Lemebel's performance group (with Francisco Casas) during the dictatorship, called *Las Yeguas del Apocalipsis* (*The Mares of the Apocalypse*): "Much of the honor of the real Republic and the Republic of Letters was saved by the Mares" (81)—no mention of CADA. Then, Bolaño recalls a couple of phone calls he had with Lemebel. Lemebel asks: "How many years has it been since the last curfew? How many years will it be until the next?" (81). Bolaño concludes that probably Lemebel and the minister wouldn't get along. While the Minister *hopes* that the *horror* won't come back; Lemebel–like Bolaño–*knows* it will, and they don't forget it.

The fourth part of this text is the narration of the literary workshops Mariana Callejas held in her house's living room. Is he counterposing Eltit's workshop–which in his narration leads to a love story–with Callejas's workshop? It parallels the sublime (love) and the sinister (*horror*) beneath these workshops. Callejas's workshop is both the center narration of Bolaño's *Nocturno de Chile* and Lemebel's "Las Orquídeas Negras de Mariana Callejas." By including this episode in this text, Bolaño gives the title a dual meaning. *The corridor with no apparent way out* is Chile. Bolaño constantly calls it "the corridor country."[11] And it is also the corridor that leads to Callejas's husband's torture chamber; thus, it is a corridor *with no apparent way out* that leads to death and horror. Bolaño ends this text with the same conclusion as the priest-critic in the novel: "And this is how the literature of every country is built" (83).

The Chilean writer Gonzalo Contreras criticizes Bolaño's apocalyptic view of humanity: "Like all apocalyptic [visions], it supposes that life is horrific. Everybody is bad. Like that, in black and white. And all of those univocal morals are moralistic; evil, evil. Ultimately, you end up in a coffin. That's it: it closes" ("Cada día" e14, my trans.). But if Bolaño had understood humanity as only the manifestation of evil, he would probably not have written a word.

Contreras is a good friend of mine who was invited to participate in Mariana Callejas's literary workshop when he was in his last year of school. In many interviews, he clarified that he knew nothing about what was happening below. He considers Bolaño's fiction dedicated to that scene as an absolute mystification of it. He believes that Bolaño uses that story because "Chilean writing has produced few characters as psychotic as Callejas, somebody who is genuinely a writer and at the same time an agent of the security services" ("Gonzalo Contreras y las visitas" 4, my trans.).

On the contrary, Bolaño seems to propose precisely through his fiction that Callejas's literary workshop (just above the torture room) does not symbolize an aberration in Western civilization. To put it differently, it is an exception, like the *State of Exception*, that confers the "secret and truer life" to civilization. Bolaño concludes, like Bataille, that literature is not innocent (Bataille, *Literature and Evil.*, ch.1). He gives the impression that evil permeates everything and everyone. Bolaño knows that the unavoidable end is a coffin. But he believes that before getting inside of it, we still can write some poems on it. Why would we? When Bolaño writes about Lemebel with profound admiration, he praises his indomitable spirit and his bravery: "I knew that this queer writer, my hero, might be on the side of the losers but that victory, the sad victory offered by Literature (capitalized, as it is here), was surely his" (*Between parentheses* 68).

Understood this way, literature is an accomplice of all hegemonic power and, at the same time, a way to weaken that hegemony; the mechanism that Western civilization has used to hide its *horror*, but also the way to expose it. For Bolaño, it is not a fair fight: "Literature is a lot like the fight of samurais, but samurais do not fight against other samurais; they fight against monsters. In general, they also know they will be defeated. Having the courage, knowing in advance that one will be defeated but coming out to fight nonetheless: that is literature" (Bolaño "Hay que mantener", my trans.). For Andrea Cobas, the real and symbolic monsters of Bolaño's fiction exist "to narrate the memories of a generation fractured by violence and which turns to literature into a desperate form of resistance that is not always possible" ("La construcción", my trans.). The monster is Civilization's *horror*. Let's not get it wrong: though Bolaño may sometimes look like a nihilist, he is not one. Nihilists do not care about the world's violence, nor do they get involved; they turn their gaze away, while Bolaño never does. Although he knows it may be unpleasant and useless, he still believes there is a moral duty to confront our civilization's violence. It may be a lost fight, but in Bolaño's fiction, it seems like the only honest way to live: a life beyond the limits imposed by the law–or the norm. That is why, for Bolaño, literature is dangerous, like walking on the edge of a bottomless pit, a place from where it is impossible to ignore the abyss. "Those 'black holes' are the defeat of the law, of civilization. The entire twentieth century comes to this" (Paz Soldán, "Introducción" 2, my trans.). Álvaro Bisama believes that Bolaño's whole literary production should be read as a black hole, "every now and then allows some light to escape" (Bisama 81, my trans.).

But where does that light come from? The answer lies in Bolaño's persistence in looking horror directly in its eyes. He insists on this because he is strongly committed to life. That is his ultimate cause. He cannot forgive–or forget–the process of history that took away "the most generous youth" of his generation. He recalls the evils of the past to warn us about the evils of the future. It is a cry to expose the cruel side of *humanism*, the side that condemns human life. In the last interview Bolaño gave, published some days before his death in *Playboy*, Mónica Maristain asks him the same question that stalked the priest-critic from *Nocturno de Chile* in the last moments of his confession: Is there a solution? Is there any remedy for the world? And Bolaño answers: "The world is alive, and nothing alive has a remedy, and that's why we are lucky" (*Entre paréntesis* 342, my trans.).

Bolaño is aware that humanity cannot avoid the cosmological law of the Universe: a sum of constant creation and destruction. But from that equation in which the sublime plus the sinister is sinister, Bolaño, facing the second part of the equation, praises the first part of it. For him, literature is a way to deploy destruction and counteract it through creation. Alexis Candia comes to a similar conclusion when he asks, regarding Bolaño's fiction: *What is behind so much evil?*

> Bolaño would seem to want to discover a warning about the end of all humankind in the 'Esthetics of Annihilation.' It seems to me to be an agonizing cry to warn that it is impossible to escape the instincts of death, because sooner or later the bombs of fortune will reach human beings. But during that brief period, men have the chance to penetrate and attain the 'magical,' that which makes life something more than a number and a nightmare (64, my trans.).

Bolaño does not doubt that he is going to disappear, that one day all his writings will disappear, and the entire universe will disappear, and even still, considering all that disappearance, for him it still makes sense to write, to create, to leave a trace in this world…to live. "Live a lot, read a lot, and fuck a lot" ("Inédito y final" 67, my trans.) was the mantra that the young *infra-realists*–Bolaño's literary gang in México–repeated when they were in their twenties and to which the mature Bolaño seemed to add one more commandment: *and write a lot*.

The way out of the corridor, the exit from the horror that is hidden in the basement of civilization, is to stand at the edge of the abyss, to look inside and yet still be able to praise life. Joaquín Font, one of the delirious and delusional madmen we come across in Bolaño's fiction, leaves us with an epiphany: "Poetry is the most beautiful thing anyone could do on this damned earth" (*Los detectives salvajes* 132, my trans.).

The End of the Illusion

Neither Bolaño nor Ghosh believes that the post-Enlightenment mission managed to overcome violence. On the contrary, both suggest that, more than removing violence, the post-Enlightenment provided good arguments to use it. These authors confront its positive aspects to its other side. Ghosh shows how Europe used that way of thinking to establish its superiority over Others (and to validate the use of force to "civilize" that Other). Ghosh exhibits the absurdity of that hierarchical relation (disguising bigotry as rationality) and counterposes a more horizontal understanding between humans. Post-Enlightenment, for Bolaño, is like a knife, useful and dangerous. And he warns us that we should never forget that the opposition between the intellectual (the poet, the artist, the philosopher, or the scientist) and the barbarian, or savage, is merely a post-Enlightenment illusion. People consecrated to the study of humanities can also be monsters, masked with the redeeming aura of the post-Enlightenment mission. As Ghosh seems to conclude, it is the idea of superiority that leads to violence and, perhaps, one way out of that corridor is through looking at someone's situation as if we were him or her.

Notes

[1] Further on, Said explains what he understands about "Non-Western Other": "The nations of contemporary Asia, Latin America, and Africa are politically independent but in many ways are as dominated and dependent as they were when ruled directly by European powers" (Said, *Culture* 19).

[2] Boaventura de Sousa Santos metaphorically calls the Center "the North": and the periphery, "the South". "It is a South that also exists in the global geographic North, the so-called interior Third World of hegemonic countries. At the same time, the global geographic South also contains not just the systematic suffering caused by colonialism and global capitalism, but also local practices that are in complicity with them. These practices constitute the imperial South" (de Souza 12, my trans.).

[3] It is not hard to find examples from other authors. Vikram Seth in *From Heaven Lake* says: "Xian reminds me irresistibly of Delhi. It is, I think, the broad streets, the dryness…" (29). And the Cuban poet Damaris Calderón remembers her home when travelling through the north of Chile: "Iquique, with its sea and its fruits reminds me (a little) of the tropics" (*El arte de aprender* 24, my trans.).

[4] David Scott seems to agree with Madan when he says that "anthropology has been a deeply Western enterprise implicitly constructing for itself Western subject positions whose absence from the surface of the text was the very sign of their authority" (79).

[5] On pages: 99; 135-8; 165 and 192.

[6] The essentializing of the *oriental* exposed by Said its replicated, for Anibal Quijano, through the racial simplification of the different peoples of America and Africa: "In the moment that the Iberians conquered, named, and colonized America, they found a great number of different peoples, each with its own history, language, discoveries and cultural products, memory and identity. Three hundred years later, all of them had become merged into a single identity: Indians. This new identity was racial, colonial and negative. The same happened with the peoples forcefully brought from Africa as slaves: Ashantis, Yorubas, Zulus, Congos, Bacongos, and others. In the span of three hundred years, all of them were Negroes or blacks" (551-2).

[7] Michael Riffaterre uses the concept of 'matrix' to interpret a poem. He says that poems "result from the transformation of the matrix, a minimal and literal sentence, into a longer, complex and non- literal periphrasis" (19).

[8] For space reasons we are using only English translations in this article. In this case, we are using Chris Andrews' translation for *By Night in Chile*.

[9] Like many characters of the novel, Sebastián Urrutia Lacroix is also based on a real person, José Miguel Ibañez Langlois, a priest from the Opus Dei and literary critic for *El Mercurio,* the main newspaper of that time and an active promoter and then unconditional supporter of the dictatorship.

[10] This concept is also known as the state of emergency, state of siege, state of necessity, etc.

[11] In *Between Parentheses* pages 76, 81 and 266, where he specifies that Chile "is the only corridor country in the world."

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