

Principles of Literary Study: Prose

Roberto Bolaño (1953-2003)

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The problem of Bolaño...

Review: Realism

5.4 In fiction, realism is a literary mode, used in a variegated family of fictional (especially novelistic) genres. It has been the novelistic norm since about 1750.

5.4.1 Realism's conventions include: few or no improbable events, no supernatural interventions, "ordinary" (prototypically, middle-class) rather than heroic or noble protagonists, the possibility of seriousness alongside comedy, and denotative reference to particularized details of everyday life rather than allegorical reference.

5.4.3 When the bar on the supernatural is lifted, especially in relation to postcolonial literatures incorporating indigenous or folk traditions, we speak of the marvelous real or magical realism.

Infrarealism [Infrarrealismo]

“Automatic writing, exquisite corpse, solo performances with no spectators, contraintes, two-handed writing, three-handed writing, [...] madrigals, poem-novels, sonnets always ending with the same word, three-word messages written on walls (“This is It,” “Laura, my love,” etc.), outrageous diaries, mail-poetry, projective verse, conversational poetry, antipoetry, Brazilian concrete poetry (written in Portuguese cribbed from the dictionary), poems in hard-boiled prose (detective stories told with great economy, the last verse revealing the solution or not), parables, fables, theater of the absurd, pop art, haikus, epigrams (actually imitations of or variations on Catullus, almost all by Moctezuma Rodríguez), desperado poetry (Western ballads), Georgian poetry, poetry of experience, beat poetry, apocryphal poems by bpNichol, John Giorno, John Cage. . . . We even put out a magazine . . . We kept moving . . . We kept moving . . . We did what we could . . . But nothing turned out right.”

-Roberto Bolaño, *The Savage Detectives*

So what is it?

“It is precisely the random moment which is comparatively independent of the controversial and unstable orders over which men fight and despair; it passes unaffected by them, as daily life. The more it is exploited, the more the elementary things which our lives have in common come to light [...] The strata of societies and their different ways of life have become inextricably mingled” (Auerbach 552).

Make new sensations appear—Subvert daily life.

O.K.

GIVE IT ALL UP AGAIN
HIT THE ROAD [LÁNCENSE A LOS CAMINOS]

—Roberto Bolaño, Mexico, 1976

Problem 1: Translation is an issue for literary study. This doesn't just reflect a concern with finding the right words. Instead, translation studies thinks about what happens when a text is translated from one language, culture, place, or time period to another.

“The conversations seemed coded in a language I didn’t know, and certainly not in the teen-age slang prevalent at that time, of which I now remember barely a couple of expressions, but in a much more ominous slang where each verb and each sentence had a touch of funeral and of holes” (“Mexican Manifesto”)

6.5 The historical horizons of any text include the time of composition, the time of setting, and all the times of circulation and reception.

Other Horizons, Other Borders

6.4 In literary studies, the central historiographical concept is that of the *period*: debates about the relations between literature and history are shaped by period designations, and periods are major subjects of interpretation.

Other Horizons, Other Borders

Problem 2: In addition to the historical horizons of a literary period, the space or nationality of a literary text is also a major subject of interpretation. This problem becomes increasingly apparent in relation to the ongoing forces of globalization and international capitalism.

Interviewer: “Are you Chilean, Spanish, or Mexican?”
[Usted es chileno, español o mexicano?]

Bolaño: “I am Latin-american.”
[Yo soy latinoamericano.]

Some alternative spatial models for thinking about texts:

- The Transnational
- The postcolonial
- Hemispheric studies
- The Americas
- Comparative Period Studies
- Global Anglophone Literatures

“Just as the hidden face of other cities is in theatres, parks, docks, beaches, labyrinths, churches, brothels, bars, cheap cinemas, old buildings, even supermarkets, the hidden face of Mexico City could be found in the enormous web of public baths, legal, semilegal, and clandestine” (“Mexican Manifesto”)

“A world of forms is unfolding before his eyes, a world of distant noises. The possibility of fear is approaching, the way wind approaches a provincial capital. Henric stops, his heart speeds up, he tries to orient himself [...] Henric knows deep down that everything is determined in some way, everything is causally linked to something else, and human nature leaves very little room for the truly gratuitous” (“Labyrinth”). Commonplacéd by MSG.

“In our private room, things were different [...] the brushing of legs, or arms, could get to be painful. Not the pain of sex but of the unpardonably lost or of the last shred of hope roaming the Impossible Country” (“Mexican Manifesto”)



“No one is certain of anything here: it is all mere supposition, glances cast by one person upon another whose enigma he cannot solve” (Auerbach 532).



“Labyrinth”

“They’re sitting around a table. It’s an ordinary table, made of wood, perhaps, or plastic, it could even be a marble table on metal legs, but nothing could be less germane to my purpose than to give an exhaustive description of it. The table is a table that is large enough to seat the above-mentioned individuals and it’s in a café. Or appears to be. Let’s suppose, for the moment, that it’s in a café.”

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Activity: What is the narrator’s relationship to his historical source, in this case, the photograph? What is his “purpose” in this story (if we can even call it that). Find specific examples in the text that establish or complicate that purpose or relationship. How might this relationship help us to better understand the problems of translation and literary space posed earlier?

Remember the work you did on your “rewriting history” exercise. You might reflect on how the fiction frames and interprets history, or consider specific moments when the story’s relationship to “big-H” History seems strange, problematic, interesting, or just wrong. Also keep in mind focalization, character, and the management of narrative time.

Terror and Trauma

“The Central American is talking to himself in Spanish, not under his breath but out loud. As their paths cross, Marie-Thérèse notices a fierce look in his eyes. They bump into each other. Both apologize. They look at each other again (and this is surprising, the way their eyes meet again *after* the apology), and what she sees, beneath the expedient mask of bitterness, is a well of unbearable horror and fear” (“Labyrinth”)

“I felt like we were in a Nazi shower and they were going to gas us; the feeling grew more intense when I saw the two boys come in, very skinny and dark, and behind them the old procurer, covered only by indescribably dirty underpants” (“Mexican Manifesto”)

The literary scene, and the politics of looking in...