

Utrecht University

Faculty of Humanities

Research Master Literary Studies: Literature in the Modern Age

Year 2006/2008

*The social role of the writer as enacted in the (literary) life of Roberto
Bolaño and represented in his novels*

ReMA thesis

Student: Ana Nacheva, 3093115

Supervisor: Prof. Dr. Ann Rigney

Second reader: Prof. Robert Folger

December 2008

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INTRODUCTION

Research Question

The second half of the twentieth century can be considered a period of major social transformations for many Latin American countries - the Cuban Revolution, the rise and fall of dictatorships in Chile, Mexico, and Argentina, and finally the transition to democracy in the 1990s, to mention just a few of the most important events. When major social transformations occur, the question arises as to the role played in those transformations by different social groups: politicians, scientists, intellectuals, and artists. In light of this, it is not surprising that the question is often asked of the Latin American writers who lived and worked in the second half of the twentieth century what their role was in the social transformations that marked the continent in this period.

In this thesis, I focus on the social role of Latin American writers born in the 1950s and living in exile/displacement, looking in particular at the way in which they enact (and reflect upon) social responsibility through their lives and works. My study will focus on the life and work of Roberto Bolaño (1953-2003).

Hence, the main research question posed in this thesis is: *What is the social role of the writer as represented in the novels and enacted in the (literary) life of Roberto Bolaño?*

Review of critical literature and relevance of the research question

Nowadays Roberto Bolaño is a very important and influential figure on the Latin American literary scene. In less than ten years, Bolaño succeeded in turning from being a virtually unknown writer to a person whom critics and literary scholars invariably describe as one of the great revelations of Latin American literature in the 90s, and even some refer to him as the best Latin American writer of the 20th century. From the late 9880s up to date, eleven novels, four collections with short stories and three collections with poetry by Roberto Bolaño have been published. The supreme quality of Bolaño's literary work was recognized by the Latin American literary world in 1999 when the novel *Los detectives salvajes* (1998) was awarded the Romulo Gallegos - the most prestigious prize in the Latin American literary field.

The ever increasing number of critical publications is a sign of the growing international interest in Roberto Bolaño's literature. There are five volumes with essays and articles published up to date. Among these are: *Roberto Bolaño: la escritura como tauromaquia* (2003), compiled by the Argentine Celina Manzoni, which contains texts that had previously been read at academic conferences or published in several (on-line) Latin American literary magazines and their character is predominantly journalistic. The second collection, *Territorios es fuga. Estudios críticos sobre la obra de Roberto Bolaño* (2003) is edited by the Chilean literary critic Patricia Espinosa and responds to the growing critical interest about Roberto Bolaño in his home country Chile. The next volume, *Jornadas Homenaje. Roberto Bolaño (1953-2003). Simposio Internacional* (2005) as the title indicates presents the fruits of the first international symposium dedicated to the Latin American writer. The fourth collection, *Roberto Bolaño: una*

literatura infinita (2005), is coordinated by Fernando Moreno and is published by the Research Center of the University of Poitiers. This volume presets the lectures held at an international conference organized by the *Center for Latin American Research* of the University of Poitiers that took place in 2002.¹

- Genre transgression

The first major issue discussed in the critical literature is: *how to characterize Bolaño's texts?* Nicasio Perera San Martin (2003) observes that Bolaño has created a metaliterary discourse; and therefore at a first sight his narratives could be situated in the current of the Nueva Novela Hispanoamericana². However, this metaliterary discourse is not autoreflexive and its purpose is *not* to provide the keys for the reading of the text itself, as often happens in the Nueva Novela Hispanoamericana. Perera San Martin points out that in the case of Bolaño the subject of the metaliterary discourse is universal literature. In this sense Bolaño's narratives share similarities with those of Borges. However, Bolaño is not satisfied only to list fictional or real authors in order to expose a literary theory (87). Further, the author poses that the literary works of Bolaño might be described as postmodern because they apply narrative techniques proper to Postmodern literature (such as irony, pastiche, intertextuality, and techniques "borrowed" from

¹ The fifth, most recent work dedicated to Bolaño is entitled *Bolaño salvaje* (2008), edited by Edmundo Paz Soldán y Gustavo Faverón Patriau, Editorial Candaya, Spain. This work is not consulted for the present thesis.

² Here it seems that Perera San Martin uses "Nueva Novela Hispanoamericana" interchangeably with "Boom", a definition for the period which covers roughly the 1960s till the 1970s and whose main representatives are Jorge Luis Borges, Julio Cortázar, Carlos Fuentes, Gabriel García Marquez and Mario Vargas Llosa.

cinema and photography).³ However, although Bolaño often treats themes like drugs and pornography, common for postmodern literature, his narratives *do not* lack positive values (88). Finally, San Martín notes that Bolaño's narratives share a "spiritual affiliation" with the Beat generation, however the routes traveled by Bolaño's characters are not in North America, but in Latin America, Europe, Africa and Asia (99). To sum up, Perera San Martín and Bolaño's scholars in general agree that his works of literature bring into being original ways of looking at the world and therefore resist interpretation by means of established critical methods.

- Intertextuality

One of the postmodern qualities of Bolaño's literature that has received great scholarly attention is intertextuality. This issue is most fully explored by Adriana Castillo de Berchenko (2003) who demonstrates that there are diverse levels of intertextuality (or in her terms "vasos comunicantes") among Bolaño's works. For example, the diverse stories in one book are interconnected as in the case of *La literatura nazi en América*. Also, the stories in two different books are related in diverse ways. For example, the novel *Estrella distante* (1996) is generated from the last chapter of *La literatura nazi en América* (1996) and the novel *Amuleto* (1999) is born from a fragment in the novel *Los detectives salvajes* (1998). Castillo de Berchenko points out that in addition to these more obvious ways of interconnection between the texts, there are also other, "hidden" interconnections. Some characters, themes, spaces, images and situations recur in the works of Bolaño. For example, as is the case of the novel *Estrella distante* and the short

³ For a theory of Postmodernism in literature see: Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1988).

story *Joanna Silvestri*(1997), the last episode in the novel is narrated from a different point of view in the short story. Therefore Dunia Gras (2005) and Ignacio Echevarria (2002) have rightly described the oeuvre of Bolaño respectively as “obra total” or “obra en marcha, incesante y abarcadora”.

Another scholar, Pablo Catalan (2003) has suggested that the metaphor of the labyrinth is one of the most precise ways to describe the literary texts of Roberto Bolaño. According to Catalan:

... la narración de Bolaño crea laberintos y que porque los crea busca salidas. Sostengo que la rica intertextualidad interna es parte de esta construcción laberíntica dentro de la cual B y B no están solamente encerradas sino también en un perpetuo movimiento, pasando de un territorio de otro por asombrosos pasillos y corredores, pasando por elaboraciones poéticas y por tejidos densos de erotismo, humor y muerte: en una palabra, viviendo. (66)

Catalan suggests that Bolaño’s literature puts its reader into a risk of being lost (70). And indeed, many of the critical works attempt to disentangle the knot of internal references among stories, images and themes created by Bolaño’s literature and to knit a coherent story. However, while performing this intellectual exercise, sometimes scholars loose at sight an important question, namely: why was this “narrative knot” created?

- The writer and literature

Two of the most frequently recurring in Bolaño’s works are the ones of the writer and the detective. These two figures are often synthesized in the figure of the writer-detective. As Castillo de Berchenko (2003) has observed the writer-detective (or poet-

detective) is present in the narratives of Bolaño in different ways: as a character, or as a reference to a “real” writer/poet, as a citation, etc. (46). Some of the writers/poets presented in the works of Bolaño are of central importance to the Latin American literary canon; for example: Julio Cortázar, Jose Donoso, Vicente Huidobro, Enrique Lihn, Pablo Neruda and Octavio Paz. Others are fairly known in the Latin American literary scene - for example, Bolaño’s best friend, the Mexican poet Mario Santiago Papasquiaro, is the prototype of one of the protagonists in *Los detectives Salvajes*. Another figure that often is present in the narratives of Bolaño is the writer himself. Two of the frequently used narrators, Arturo Belano and B, share biographical similarities with their creator. Hence Arturo Belano and B have been described as “the alter-egos of Bolaño” by the critics.

The frequent presence of writers in the narratives of Bolaño has been analyzed by Celina Manzoni (2005) who alludes to Roland Barthes’s notions of “co-existence” and “biographemas”⁴ in order to provide an interpretation of the images of writers in Bolaño’s works of literature - images that seem to exist in a space in-between the biographical and the fictional. Manzoni proposes that many of the narratives and poems of Bolaño:

proponen ese juego de identificación y eventualmente de co-existencia en el que las biografías de escritores, o quizá, sus “biografemas”, se despliegan en variantes que van de la admiración a la irrisión y el absurdo en un movimiento de homenaje y a veces a conjuración de sus fantasmas. (35)

⁴ The notions of “co-existence” and “biographemas” are introduced by Roland Barthes in: Roland Barthes. *Sade, Fourier, Loyola* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1971).

Manzoni concludes that one of the objectives of this “identification game” is to prompt reflection on literature, and in particular the author suggests that Bolaño employs this technique as a means to question the Latin American literary canon. According to her, the literary project of Bolaño “instala de una manera casi dominante una reflexión acerca de la literatura, el sistema literario y el ámbito semántico del canon literario” (36). In particular, Manzoni suggests that Bolaño creates “una imagen despiadada de la institución literaria puesta en crisis y desenmascarada” (37).

- The reader as a detective

One of the results from the above mentioned qualities of Bolaño’s literary works is that the reader has to act more as a creator of the text rather than as a consumer. Diego Trellez Paz (2003) has proposed that the reader of Roberto Bolaño’s narratives must act as a detective in order to find his/her way through the texts. Trellez Paz reminds that the idea of the reader as an active creator of the text has been proposed by José María Castellet in *La hora del lector* (1957)⁵, and also by Roland Barthes in *S/Z* (1970)⁶ where it was proposed that the objective of the work of literature should be to convert the reader from a consumer of the text to an active creator of it. According to Trellez Paz, this aim has been achieved for the first time in Latin American literature by Julio Cortázar with *Rayuela* (1963) and its “Tablero de dirección” that offers an alternative way to read the novel. In Bolaño’s case there are no guidelines for alternative readings and the number of such readings is infinite. In this sense, Trellez Paz has noted that

⁵ José María Castellet, *La hora del lector. Notas para la una iniciación a la literatura narrativa de nuestros días* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1957).

⁶ Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1970).

Bolaño went a huge step further than Julio Cortázar by opening new ways both for the creation and for the reading of works of literature.

To sum up, the existing critical literature has drawn a map of the vast narrative territory covered by the works of Roberto Bolaño.⁷ The main themes related to his work which are explored in the above mentioned studies are 1) genre transgression (or genre subversion), 2) intertextuality, 3) the writer and literature, and 4) the reader as a detective. The question raised by the present thesis is based on the studies of Castillo de Berchenko, Manzoni, and Trellez Paz. These studies recognize that literature, writing, and reading are among the central issues explored in the oeuvre of Bolaño, but none of them poses explicitly the question which is central to the preset research.

Methodology and theoretical assumptions

In this thesis, I will limit myself to the exploration of two novels from the oeuvre of Roberto Bolaño, in particular *La literatura nazi en América* (1996) and *Los detectives salvajes*. It has proved to be very difficult to make a selection at all considering that, as has been noted earlier, one of the specific features of Bolaño's literary works is their

⁷ For studies focused on Bolaño's novels see: about *Amuleto*: Castillo de Berchenko (2005a), Dés (2002b), and Manzoni (2002c, 2005a). Manzoni (2002b) treats *Estrella distante*. For critical works on *Monsieur Pain* see: Dés (2002), Osés (2003), and Pinto (2002b). Critical works especially about *Nocturno de Chile* are: Bisama (2003), and Moreno (2005). Pinto (2002) treats *La pista de hielo*. Iñigo Madrigal (2005) treats *Una novelita lumpen*. For studies focused on Bolaño's short-stories see: *Llamadas telefónicas* are explored by De Roso (2002), Decante Araya (2005), Echevarría (2002), García-Corales (2003), and Masoliver Ródenas (2002). *Putas Asesinas* are explored by Dés (2002c), and Echevarría (2002c). Andrews (2005) offers a theory for reading of the short-stories. For studies on poetry see: Blum (2003), Espinosa (2003a), Gómez (2003), Krebs (2005), Usandizaga (2005), Zambra (2002). For studies on Bolaño's articles see : Santa-Ollala (2005). Personal reader responses see: Contreras (2003), Jofré (2003), Novoa (2003), Osés (2003), Zambra (2003).

interrelatedness. Two reasons underlie my decision to limit myself to the exploration of two novels, instead of exploring the whole oeuvre.

The first reason is related to the scope of this thesis. It is recognized that the research question posed in this thesis would be explored in greater depth if the whole oeuvre is considered. However, a detailed analysis of all the literary works of Roberto Bolaño - given the space restrictions of the present thesis - is deemed impossible. The second reason that motivates my choice is content related. *La literatura nazi* and *Los detectives salvajes* are the novels which explicitly question the social role of the writer in opposing and, at the same time, complementary ways. While *La literatura nazi en América* makes use of the (“most objective”) genre of literary history⁸, *Los detectives Salvajes* employs and destabilizes the (“most subjective”) genres of testimonio, diary, and autobiography.⁹ In addition, both novels enter into dialogue with the recent history of Latin American (literary) history, providing multiple perspectives on it.

Considering that the main goals of this thesis are 1) to define what the social role of the writer is as enacted in the (literary) life of Roberto Bolaño and 2) to describe the ways in which this role is represented in two of his novels, the research design of the present study is descriptive. In order to accomplish the first aim, I will explore the biography of the writer by looking at the information presented on the official website of Roberto

⁸ The idea of history as narrative has been introduced in the 1970s by the American philosopher of history Hayden White in his landmark works *Metahistory: the historical imagination in nineteenth-century Europe* (Baltimore: John Hopkins U P, 1973) and *The content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: John Hopkins U P, 1987). White’s works have provoked heated debates in the field of historiography, while a central issue in these debates has been the validity of truth claims in history (here: history as a scientific representation of the past in the form of writing). For a recent work that provides an excellent overview of the complexities of historical representation see: Peter Burke, *New Perspectives on Historical Writing* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001 [1991]).

⁹ Both novels also employ the genre of detective fiction. This will be discussed in *Chapters 5* and *6*.

Bolaño, as well as his public discourses such as interviews for print media and television. My assumption is that the particular life-style of Bolaño, his publishing history and also his views about literature as expressed in the media offer important information about the way in which he envisioned and enacted his social role. In order to achieve the second aim, I will provide an interpretation of the novels *La literatura nazi en América* and *Los detectives salvajes*.

Given that this study is 1) problem- rather than theory-driven and 2) the idea of social and/or cultural embeddedness is assumed by the main research question posed, establishing a context is the first step to be taken. The main source of information I use to position my case study in a broader context is *Literary Cultures of Latin America: a Comparative History* (2004) edited by Djelal Kadir and Mario J. Valdés.

Literary Cultures of Latin America: a Comparative History marks a turning point in the study of Latin American literature. First of all, this study offers an up-to-date overview of the most important scholarly debates related to Latin American literature. Secondly, *Literary Cultures of Latin America: a Comparative History* is the result of the collaborative efforts of two hundred forty-two scholars. Therefore, it not only provides information about the state-of-the-art of Latin American literary studies, but it also offers an unparalleled diversity of points of view on Latin American literary culture. Finally, the project is backed up by clear theoretical assumptions in regards to the construction of a literary history. The main theoretical assumptions and concepts employed in *Literary Cultures of Latin America* are outlined below.

One of the central concepts in *Literary Cultures of Latin America: a Comparative History* is “cultural imaginary”. Cultural imaginary is “the collective expression of communities that creates significations of identity. It affects singular human beings insofar as they all live in language-speaking communities of one size or another. ...The cultural imaginary is a foundational aspect of all human society, large or small, and in some cases also of conglomerates of disparate social groups (as we will contend in the case of Latin America). The imaginary consists of forms, images, emblems, flags, and so forth, but most of it is made up of modes of signification in the community.” (Kadir and Valdés 2004, xix) The term cultural imaginary is at the basis of the definition of literature developed in *Literary Cultures of Latin America*. Literature is seen to be the main source of the cultural imaginary and what provides its historicity.

The second concept of central importance in *Literary Cultures of Latin America* is “literary culture”. Literary culture is the context of literature and it “designates an interactive network of sociolinguistic factors that make possible the communication and circulation of images, stories, beliefs, and other imaginative forms by which a community identifies itself. The field of literary culture encompasses all the varied discursive models that institutions and individuals have created in order to communicate, influence, entertain, or meet the aspirations of the social group. (Valdés 2004, 156) These various discursive models which make up the field of literary culture do not merge in a homogeneous discursive model that could be named “Latin American literary culture”, but rather coexist in a “heterogeneous unity of differences”

(Kadir and Valdés 2004, xviii). This “heterogeneous unity” of differences is a dialectic concept, after Paul Ricoeur’s idea of the conflict of interpretations.¹⁰

Taking into account the heterogeneous discourses which form Latin American literary culture and answering to the challenge of Michael Foucault’s definition of history as discontinuity¹¹, the contributors of *Literary Culture of Latin America* aim to create “an open history”. The aim of such an open history is not only to demonstrate that every history is a construct, but also and almost importantly, that it is “above all a construct that deconstructs itself”. (Kadir and Valdés 2004, xviii). This aim is achieved considering that *Literary Cultures of Latin America* consists of one hundred seventy-six articles which offer multiple perspectives to Latin American literary culture, thus creating a history without beginning, middle and end. In this sense, *Literary Culture of Latin America* can be better described as a hypertext which is constructed depending on the interpretation of the reader and “the line of inquiry pursued by the particular reader of this history.” (Kadir and Valdés 2004, xx) The “hyper-textual” qualities of *Literary Cultures of Latin America* also display the understanding of the authors that literary history is an incessant process rather than a fixed representation.

The concepts of cultural imaginary, literary culture and the heterogeneous unity of differences imply a very broad definition of the “literary”. Indeed, the authors have succeeded to include an unprecedented variety of textual forms, institutions, and writers that have previously been excluded from literary history. However, Roberto Bolaño’s

¹⁰ Paul Ricoeur. *Time and Narrative*, 3 vols. trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer. (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1984 [1983]).

¹¹ Michael Foucault, “The Discourse on Language”, trans. Rupert Sawyer, in *The Archeology of Knowledge* (New York: Random, 1972), 215-237.

works are not present in this literary history. This exclusion may be explained with his late arrival at the literary scene, in a moment when the texts had probably already been selected. Therefore, the purpose of entering into dialogue with *Literary Cultures of Latin America* is twofold. On the one hand, I “look back” at the history of Latin American literature in order to be able to embed my case study in its cultural context. On the other hand, I envision the present thesis as one of the myriad of continuations of the history of Latin American literary cultures.

Structure

This thesis is divided into three main parts. The first part establishes the context necessary for the exploration of the particular case (Roberto Bolaño and his literary works). In *Chapter 1*, I will discuss the figure of the Latin American writer, and in particular: the idea of the writer as a cultural mediator, the position of Latin American writer in society/culture, the relation of the writer with the nation (national discourses), the image of the Latin American writer in exile, and the opposition between the notions of autonomous writer and committed writer. The purpose of this chapter is to establish a basis for comparison between the way Bolaño sees his social role and the ways in which this role was portrayed in recent scholarly discussions.

In *Chapter 2: Textual forms (unexpected narratives)*, I will give an overview of developments in several textual forms, and more specifically archival fiction, testimonio, and detective fiction. The purpose of this chapter is to briefly outline the challenges for the interpretation (reading) of these textual forms. The inclusion of this chapter in the thesis is problem-driven. In the process of writing this thesis, I was often challenged by

the reading of the two novels because in both of them elements from one (or more than one) of the above mentioned textual forms are employed and subverted. It will be shown in this chapter that all of the textual forms presented resist to conventional modes of interpretation.

The second part of the thesis offers biographical information about Roberto Bolaño (*Chapter 3*). A problem which I faced with this chapter was the lack of sufficient resources; however, I found the inclusion of this chapter in the thesis necessary since the novel *Los detectives Salvajes* puts into play many biographical elements. Then in *Chapter 4*, I will explore the way in which Roberto Bolaño envisioned his social role by exploring his public discourses such as interviews, lectures and newspaper columns.

The third part of this thesis provides a reading of *La literatura nazi en América* (in *Chapter 5*) and *Los detectives salvajes* (in *Chapter 6*) focusing on the ways in which the social role of the writer is represented in the novels.

The main argument that I will try to develop in the thesis is that the role of the writer as enacted by Roberto Bolaño was to remain in a marginal position both in society and in the literary field, so that he could maintain independence from social and literary institutions. From this marginal point of view Bolaño could uphold a critical position towards society and the literary establishment. Further, I will attempt to show that one of the main roles that Bolaño has played through his works of literature is one of a literary historian; a historian who advocates distrust of the discourses of official literary history, provides alternatives ways to look at the recent history of Latin American

literature and urges his readers to engage in their own investigations. Finally, I hope to demonstrate that Bolaño succeeded in sustaining a very high level of integrity of actions, public discourses and works of literature, a fact which adds even more value to his personal and literary accomplishments.

PART I: THE CONTEXT

Chapter 1: The figure of the Latin American writer

1.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to establish a basis for comparison between the way Roberto Bolaño sees his social role and the ways in which the social role of the Latin American writer has been portrayed in recent scholarly discussions in *Literary Cultures of Latin America: a Comparative History* (Kadir and Valdés 2004). Given that the present study is problem-driven, my strategy has been to first explore what the main issues are concerning the role of the writer as displayed in Bolaño's public discourses and then to look at how these issues are viewed in recent scholarly discussions. That is why the overview provided in this chapter is not exhaustive, but rather concentrates on those scholarly discussions which are relevant for my case study.

1.2 The role of the Latin American writer as a cultural mediator

One of the most interesting ways to look at the literary production of a given writer considering both his/her biography and the cultural/historical context is offered by Mario J. Valdés in his article “Social History of the Latin American writer” (2004). The approach of Valdés is derived from Bourdieu’s concepts “field” and “habitus”¹² and also from Ricoeur’s idea about the “prefigurative as a matrix of cultural discursivity”¹³ (Valdés 2004, 156). The goal of Valdés in this article is to trace the professionalization of the writer in Latin America and to explore the mediating function of the writer in society in historical terms. The theoretical framework provided by Ricoeur and Bourdieu helps Valdés to analyze the sense of purpose as seen by writers and to explore “the position-takings which the writer engages in as he or she responds to the demands of society” (Valdés 2004, 156). Central to the argument of Valdés is the idea about the role of the writer as a cultural mediator. As Valdés puts it:

From an anthropological perspective the role of the writer in society is that of a cultural mediator. Individually or collectively, writers address the lettered sector of community; they may do so in their own name or anonymously. Writers deal in values, images, ideas that have been appropriated for the specific topic of their discourse. Literary mediation is especially powerful because it carries both the possibility of the transmission of information and the skills to engage the reader’s imagination and thus increase the likelihood of influencing the reader’s course of action. (Valdés, 2004, 155)

¹² Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: a Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice, (Harvard: Harvard U P 1984 [1979]), and Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, tans Randal Johnson (New Yorks: Columbia U P, 1993).

¹³ Paul Ricoeur. *Time and Narrative*, 3 vols. trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1984 [1983]).

As was outlined in the introduction to this thesis, the field of literary culture encompasses all various discursive models that institutions and individuals have created in order to communicate, influence, entertain, or meet the aspirations of the social group. Valdés's definition of the writer's role grows out of the definition of literary culture and allows him to focus on the specific roles of writers as participants in the literary field (as defined by Bourdieu), which in turn is part of a given society (and culture).

The first advantage of the idea of the writer as a cultural mediator, that I would like to mention, is its flexibility. For if by "culture" we understand shared values, images, and so forth, there is an immense variety of issues which a writer could mediate. In this sense, this definition could accommodate many diverse cases, or, to put it differently, it shows sensitivity to the fact that writers (and literature) in contemporary societies have a broad range of functions (such as entertainment, propaganda, instruction and so forth) which may be overlapping or unclearly defined. The second advantage of this definition is that it is not a normative one; it does not prescribe what themes, values, or ideas should be mediated through works of literature. Indeed, Valdés acknowledges that contemporary works of literature cannot be divided into cult and popular, whereas greater importance is attributed to the former ones.

Another aspect of this definition, which makes it especially functional in the case of Latin American writers, is that it reflects the fact that traditionally Latin American literature is a transnational phenomenon. However, if we consider Latin American

literature as a transnational phenomenon, can we talk about the social role of a Latin American writer at all? Is not the idea of a social role of the Latin American writer a contradiction in terms? Valdés suggests that

the making of the writer is situated in the social context, and it is this collective participation of writers in society that creates the cultural imaginary and gives meaning to the term “Latin American literature”. (Valdés 2004, 162)

The first part of the statement of Valdés is precise to the extent that writers unavoidably live in a given society which somehow conditions their world views. However, factors such as the increased mobility of people and/or information in the second half of the twentieth century (and especially at the end of the twentieth century) surely influence “the making of the writer”, in the sense that it may “take place” in several societies. Hence, it is becoming more and more difficult for scholars to define exactly which society contributed for the formation of particular worldviews or literary tastes of a particular writer. The second part of the statement, in particular the phrase “collective participation of writers in society” is in my view problematic. The point is the following: in which society do exiled/displaced writers participate? For example, does a Chilean writer who lives in Spain participate in the Chilean society through his or her works? Or does this writer participate in Spanish society because he or she lives there? Or maybe both? And if we assume that an exiled/displaced writer, who lives in Spain, participates in Spanish society, does he or she contribute to the creation of Latin American cultural imaginary? In my view, a way out of this conundrum is to look for clues about the sense of belonging as defined by the writer in question.

The next advantage of Valdés's definition is that it implies that works of literature are communicative events, for "mediation" always implies communication¹⁴. Valdés rightly points out that

...the relationship between writers and the society in which they work is a constant symbiotic process of interaction between the creative text and the critical text. Writers respond to their intellectual and material context through their work. (Valdés 2004, 161)

Agreeing with Valdés that writers respond to the context with their works, I would like to add a precautionary note. Nowadays, it is widely agreed that the process of human communication is very complex, so even in the case of face-to-face communication it may be difficult to define why a given question provides a certain response. Hence, if we have as "interlocutors" writer X and an impersonal subject such as society (cultural/intellectual context) we must be very careful in describing and explaining the responses of writer X. For example, the reaction to social injustice may range from open critique, to self-censorship, to denial and escapism. Moreover, if this is not explicitly stated by the writer, how do we know to what exactly writers respond?

The final aspect of the definition of cultural mediation that I would like to look at is the implicitly positive evaluation of the writer's profession. Valdés suggests that writers "deal in values". The word "value" has a positive connotation and by using it to define

¹⁴ Certainly, the idea of works of literature as narrative media is not a new one; it has been increasingly gaining currency in Literary Studies during the last thirty years thanks to Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media. The extensions of Man* (London / New York: Routledge, 2002[1964]). In this sense, Valdés' s contribution is to propose author-centered studies instead of text-centered ones.

the writer's role he imposes the traditional assumption that writers have a *positive* role. Indeed, we usually view the writer's profession positively. By saying "we" I mean literary scholars. For literary scholars may consider a particular writer's work to be of inferior quality, but the very fact of *being* a literary scholar goes hand in hand with the assumption that writers and their works are important and valuable (for society). In *Chapter 5* of the present thesis it will be argued that Bolaño (through his novel *La literatura nazi en América*) has maintained an opposing view, namely that the writers' role in society could be a negative one.

1.3 The Latin American writer: central or marginal to society?

Mario Valdés suggests in "Social History of the Latin American writer" (2004) that writers in Latin America can be defined by their dual participation in society. Dual participation, in the author's view, means that "(a) writer's socioeconomic status defines his or her place in everyday life, but it does not determine a writer's place in literary culture" (Valdés, 2004, 155). Even further, gap between socio-economic success and literary status seems almost endemic to being a Latin American writer since in Valdés's view only few writers in Latin America have succeeded in making a living exclusively from their literary production.

Further, Valdés suggests that Latin American writers - especially in the second half of the twentieth century - are likely to be under risk of becoming an object of state repression:

In the present political climate, writers are especially vulnerable since the ideological position of the writer is particularly exposed and thus subject to institutional disapproval, exile, and even death. (Valdés 2004, 155)

In my view, the above statements deserve additional attention. Why would somebody consciously choose to destine oneself to poverty and, what is worse, to put his or her life under risk of institutional disapproval by becoming a writer? Is not the sacrifice too big? And why would somebody trade off economic stability for potential cultural centrality?

I suggest that we consider Latin American writers in the context of Latin American literary culture. Firstly, a reason for writers to choose cultural centrality instead of socio-economic status is the traditional supreme quality of Latin American literature. Mario Valdés cites Justo Sierra (1848- 1912) who on the eve of the Mexican Revolution suggested that:

Latin America is poor, its people impoverished, and its effective political structures primitive. It is a continent plagued by racism and constantly threatened by the military and economic intervention of the United States; yet it is a continent of cultural refinement and brilliance. (cited in Valdés 2004, 158)

Valdés acknowledges that Latin America was and still is a continent characterized by economic underdevelopment, but that nevertheless its literary culture has a degree of depth and sophistication that has rarely been surpassed. In my view, tradition of literary excellence must be considered an important source of inspiration for those who decide to devote themselves to writing.

Secondly, the figure of the writer in Latin America is traditionally imbued with a very high value (i.e. writers enjoy a high status). For example, the Mexican writer Octavio Paz is viewed by many as a “national institution”. In addition, the Boom writers were canonized, promoted and depicted as revolutionary and heroic figures by literary scholars, journalists and editors (see Kerr 2004).

Finally, the territory which Latin American literary culture encompasses is immense; and this may inspire potential writers. Valdés proposes that nowadays Latin America’s market of symbolic goods is constituted by five distinct sectors. The first sector of the market is the oldest one: the academic sector which has been served by specialized journals, books, and cultural supplements in the daily newspapers. The second sector of the market consists of the educated middle class who read what critics from the first sector consider significant or what has been positively valued in the United States, and, to a lesser extent, Europe. Books in translation fill an important part of this sector of the market. A good number of people who have find their place in this sector read English, but they also buy translations. The third sector of the market for Latin American writers is not in Latin America at all but is composed of the mostly English- but also French-language readership around the world that has access to Latin American writing only in translation. One medium for dissemination in this market is high-profile journals such as the *New York Review of Books* or *Lire*. It is noteworthy that today the novels of the leading Latin American writers appear on the international literary market simultaneously in Spanish, French, and English. The fourth sector is the Latin American public that is illiterate or barely literate; on average, they don’t read much more than

comics, but they do have access to the symbolic goods through television and, to a lesser extent, cinema (Valdés 2004, 163). The fifth and final sector of the market is made up of multiple special-interest groups such as feminist organizations, political organizations of the left and the right, and church-oriented groups that range from liberation theology to the traditional Vatican-bound church hierarchy and the evangelical Protestant groups financially supported by groups in the United States (Valdés 2004, 164).

Now, if we even only think of the second and the third segments of this market of symbolic goods, we may infer that the public which Latin American writers may potentially reach is enormous. This is especially true for contemporary Latin American writers considering the conditions of distribution. As Valdés notes, works of literature from Latin America are often published in several countries and they are simultaneously translated into several languages. In the second half of the twentieth century, especially from the sixties on, with the Boom writers the Latin American literary field “merges” with an international literary field. This is to say that Latin American literature becomes especially popular on the international literary scene. Valdés suggests that it is not that all of a sudden Latin American literature changed in a very positive way, or that Latin American literature “came out of nowhere”, but rather the explanation is that Europe and the United States “arrived at postmodernity at the end of the twentieth century to discover that Latin Americans were already there and had been for some time” (167).

1.4. The (image of the) Latin American writer in exile

The figure of the Latin American writer as an *exiled writer* is one of the most common ones in the second half of the twentieth century. Clara E. Lida and Francisco Zapata

(2004) suggest that “(i)n just over a century Latin America has changed from being a continent known to receive millions of immigrants,...to becoming one that – from the 1960s- has exported millions of immigrants *en masse*” (Lida and Zapata 2004, 503). Lida and Zapata point to the fact that when talking about exile, migration, and so forth, the differences between such notions should be considered. By *immigration* the authors understand “movements of considerable numbers of people, generally international in origin, but in every case involving a nationality different from that of the new country” (503). The term *exile* is taken to refer to “a population that was forced to abandon their mother country to seek refuge in other lands for political reasons or as a direct result of war” (503). Finally, the term *displacement* is understood as “a process of internal migration implying a massive transfer of population of predominantly rural origin to regions boasting more modern economies” (503). All the concepts of immigration, exile and displacement inevitably provoke an urge to “define and fix personal identity” (Lida and Zapata 2004, 503).

In my view, the distinction between exile, immigration and displacement is necessary because the three conditions provoke different reactions to the “old” and to the “new” environment. In other words, a person who is forced to abandon one’s country would most probably react to one’s new home in a different way than people who left their country voluntarily in search of better economical opportunities, for example.

Similarly, Ivan Almeida and Cristina Parodi (2004) agree that “the figure of “exile” is an essential ingredient of all approximations to understand Latin American literature and that such a figure is to a certain extent linked to the phenomenon of diaspora” (512). In

their article “Exile in the narrative of the Spanish American Diaspora in the Twentieth Century” (2004), they explore several paradigms of “exile” as observed in the Latin American narrative of the second half of the twentieth century.

Citing the famous essay by Walter Benjamin “The Storyteller” (1968 [1955])¹⁵, Almeida and Parody suggest that *travelers* and *old people* are the prototypes of the narrator. “One group narrates what does not happen *here* and the other what is not happening *now*” (514). In this sense, the very possibility of narrative is related with the idea of displacement, be it on a temporal or on a spatial axis. Different attitudes towards displacement provoke the creation of different types of narratives:

The overvaluation of what is lost produces both nostalgic literature, which integrates and restores what happened *there*, and *ethnologist literature*, which integrates and restores what happened *before*. Both tendencies give a priority to politics; essentially conservative, they crystallize in the theme of “national identity”? Conversely, the overvaluation of what is acquired produces a *literature of adoption* that integrates and restores the situation of the new arrival *here* (in general, Europe), and a *literature of innovation* that directs a critical gaze toward tradition [and] is open to new forms of thinking and writing. These two last tendencies give a priority to the aesthetic; essentially progressive they lead to the theme of “extraterritoriality”. (Almeida and Parody 2004, 516)

Two different paradigms of exile result from the above alternatives. These are the 1) paradigm of *nostalgia* and 2) the paradigm of *extraterritoriality*. In addition, Almeida and Parody suggest 3) the paradigms of *nomadism*, and 4) *double displacement* which

¹⁵ Walter Benjamin, “The Storyteller, Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov”, in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968), 83-109.

are typical for the Latin American literary narrative of the twentieth century. The literature of nostalgia seems to be if not the most common one, at least the most expected from writers in exile. Indeed, there are many examples of nostalgic literature in the second half of the twentieth century. In turn, nomadic literature is created by authors such as Alfredo Bryce Echenique. As Almeida and Parodi poetically describe it:

Like a river whose waters do not change as it passes through different landscapes or the snail that travels with its own house, there are times when exiled artists decide to emigrate to literature, taking their own image with them by thematicizing exile as themselves exiles and making literature the autobiographical fictionalization of their own uprooting. (Almeida and Parodi 2004, 517)

The paradigm that interests me most in the present study is the second one: the paradigm of *extraterritoriality*. Ivan Almeida and Cristina Parodi see Julio Cortázar as the prototype of the exiled writer. “Initially an “aesthetic” exile, Cortázar began to take on the role of political exile when some of his works were prohibited in Argentina” (514). Exploring the case of Julio Cortázar, Almeida and Parodi distinguish several characteristic features of the writer’s attitude towards exile.

As is well known, Cortázar’s narratives are famous for their experimentalism and literariness. Almeida and Parodi suggest that this is a result of the way Cortázar viewed his condition of exile. “It is clear, then, that Cortázar’s position is that of confronting exile in literature” (514). The authors cite the famous polemics of Cortázar with Oscar Collazos concerning the political commitment of the writer. There Cortázar clearly defined his point of view, stating that “la novela revolucionaria no es solamente la que

tiene un “contenido” revolucionario sino la que procura revolucionar la novela misma, la forma novela y para ello utiliza las armas de la hipótesis de trabajo, la conjetura, la trama pluridimensional, la fractura del lenguaje” (cited in Almeida and Parodi 2004, 515).¹⁶ Hence, the writer did not perceive his own works of literature as politically unengaged.

The fourth paradigm offered by Almeida and Parodi - the paradigm of *dual displacement* - is not concerned with the way writers understand their condition of exile, but rather with the way the reading public understands it. There are several issues related to the paradigm of *dual displacement*. The first one is linked to the way in which the foreign reader perceives the Latin American literary work. According to Almeida and Parodi, “Certain themes and narrative forms considered as ordinary in Latin America play the role of a displaced element within a North American or European context and return to their place of origin, creating the effect of a second-level displacement” (519).

Another problem that Almeida and Parody rightly point out is that of the expectations which the foreign reading public has about “the work of an exiled author”. Almeida and Parody suggest that the reading public perceives the work of writers labeled as “exiled” differently from the work of other writers. To support their claim, the authors cite Hernan Valdés who points out that “The first corresponds to a strictly literary curiosity in global terms, whereas the second functions in accordance with specialized canons in which the aesthetic is subordinated to the humanitarian. This situation creates a new

¹⁶ Julio Cortázar, “Literatura en la revolución y revolución en la literatura: algunos malentendidos a liquidar”, in *Julio Cortázar: al término del polvo y el sudor* (Montevideo: Biblioteca de Marcha, 1987), 105-37.

system of expectations that condition reception” (Valdés H. cited in Almeida and Parody 2004, 519).

The final problem which Almeida and Parodi see with the paradigm of dual displacement is that of exploitation of clichés about Latin American identity. They give as an example the observations of Jorge Edwards who suggests that:

some of his fellow countrymen have known how to cultivate and exploit the image that Europe always seeks in the Latin American, the primitive man, fruit of a virgin, exuberant, whether from the extreme south of the continent or from the tropical jungle, which has added the very contemporary ecological elements to the myth of the Noble Savage .

(Almeida and Parodi 2004, 519).

Employing the image of the Latin American as a “noble savage” in a work of literature is seen to be a good sales strategy because the reading public is willing to “consume” this image. This problem, in Almeida and Parodi’s view, becomes even more serious when the suffering caused by exile/displacement is trivialized by its conversion into a sales strategy.

1.5. The Latin American writer - autonomous or committed?

The idea of a “social role” of the writer goes hand in hand with the idea of national belonging, for in the modern era we tend to think of societies in terms of distinct nations with their own history and culture. According to Lucille Kerr (2004):

Spanish American authors, like authors more generally, have played important roles in Spanish American society at least since the nineteenth century. Indeed in Spanish America it has not been uncommon for political figures to be writers, or writers to be political figures (e.g., Bello, Bosch, Gallegos, Martí, Sarmiento); it is not uncommon for authors to address audiences outside their own countries about political, economic and social issues, as well as about literature and culture (e.g., Dorfman, Fuentes, García Marquez, Paz). (Kerr 2004, 607)

If one takes into account that all of the writers mentioned in passing by Kerr are very central figures in the Latin American literary scene, one may infer that the Latin American writer is traditionally a politically engaged writer. Moreover, considering that the second half of the twentieth century is a period of major social transformations (upheavals) in Latin America, one may expect writers to be socially engaged. Indeed, Mario J. Valdés suggests that in the last decade of the twentieth century, “almost every writer in Latin America has taken part in the debate that attempts to heal the wounds of the post-dictator era in Argentina, Brazil and Chile; and also in smaller countries like El Salvador, Guatemala, and Uruguay” (Valdés 2004, 167).

Another scholar, Javier Lasarte Valcárel expresses an opinion opposite to that of Valdés. According to Lasarte Valcárel (2004) :

At the end of the twentieth century, it has become commonplace among Latin American intellectuals to criticize the ideas of nation, national culture, and national identity. These intellectuals are torn by perplexity and disillusionment, decentered in their quest to redefine their place in the national scene. (Lasarte Valcárel 2004, 535)

Citing Renato Ortiz¹⁷, Lasarte Valcárel proposes that “national borders can no longer contain the shifting identities within them” (535). Lasarte Valcárel posits that there are three factors responsible for this change. The first one is the process of transnationalization of mass society. The second factor is related to “exhaustion as much of political models – from progressive nationalism to orthodox Left-wing ideologies - as of reading strategies, which have proposed significant redefinitions of intellectual discourses in the current social dynamics”, and the third factor is related to the pressure exercised by marginalized social groups that were historically silenced, and that struggle to create a public discourse (535). Reviewing the scholarly (and intellectual) debates in relation to the idea of a national identity, Lasarte Valcárel suggests that this at a first glance somber intellectual climate has provoked Latin American intellectuals to rethink central notions such as culture, identity, nationality, and popularism. Lasarte Valcárel gives as an example the work of Néstor García Canclini, *Cultural híbridas, estrategias para entrar y salir de la modernidad* (1990) who considers the nation, nationality, identity, and culture as practices, rather than as abstract notions. While reviewing *Cultural híbridas, estrategias para entrar y salir de la modernidad* (1990), one may notice that indeed García Canclini *describes* the nation, culture, etc. However, there is no critical dimension in his work. This suggests that Canclini does not see his role as an intellectual as somebody providing a critical view on society/Latin American nations.

This brings me to my next point. All the above views reiterate the idea that there is no consensus among Latin American scholars or writers what their role should be. Even

¹⁷ Renato Ortiz , *Otro territorio. Ensayos sobre el mundo contemporáneo*. (Buenos Aires. Universidad Nacional de Quilmes, 1996).

further, our evaluation of the role that a given writer/intellectual plays in his or her society is an unstable one. In the article “Imagining Narrative Territories” (2004), Lucile Kerr develops a similar argument. She proposes that the opposition of notions such as art for art’s sake versus committed literature, art as entertainment versus art as instruction, and reflexive or self-conscious writing versus realist or referential writing is a precarious one. According to Kerr (2004):

One might read the Spanish American story as a story of negotiations not only between competing literary currents but also between different ideologies, between competing ideas about literature, and as a story about prose narrative in particular. In that contest the view of literature as entertainment, as existing for its own sake (i.e., “art for art’s sake”) or for pleasure, contends with the view as instructive, as functioning to depict and teach readers about social reality. The idea of narrative as necessarily referential, as obliged to refer to and to represent the real world, or to take positions about social issues and historical events, struggles against the idea of narrative literature as self-sufficient and constitutive of its own reality, as obliged to recognize its own artifice and to engage the generic and discursive principles governing its production and reception. (Kerr 2004, 597)

Kerr supports her provocative statements by exploring the phenomenon of the Boom writers. She examines two major literary magazines which created competing images, and elaborated opposing discourses about the mission of the Boom writers. The first magazine cited by the author is *Cása de las Américas* (founded in 1960 in Cuba). As Kerr explains, this magazine provoked “significant discussion about the writer’s role in relation to the Revolution in particular and to political activity in general” (599). From the point of view of *Cása de las Américas*, the image of the Latin American writer was

one of a necessarily politically and socially committed writer and the Boom writers were seen as committed writers. However, Kerr argues that this image of the Boom writers was the result of the ideology of the magazine which was to promote Cuban revolutionary culture. The second magazine explored by Kerr is *Mundo Nuevo* (founded in Paris). The ideology behind the French magazine was to focus on the “literariness” of the works of Vargas Llosa, Márquez, and Cortázar. That is why from the point of view of the collaborators of *Mundo Nuevo* the Boom writers were seen as “dedicated solely to the art of literature” (Kerr 2004, 599).

A discussion about how writers saw their own role, and whether they considered themselves committed or autonomous is not an objective of Kerr’s article. To get back to Cortázar’s case discussed in the previous subsection, one can infer that most probably writers defined their own roles in agreement with their own definitions of political commitment or autonomy. As far as the case of Cortázar is concerned, it is easy to see that one could find good reasons to define oneself both as politically committed and as an autonomous writer. In any case, the article of Lucille Kerr raises awareness that the categories “autonomous writer” and “committed writer” are precarious in the sense that they depend on the point of view and the ideology of the observer.

1.6 Conclusions

The purpose of this chapter has been to establish the context for understanding the role of the writer as envisioned by Roberto Bolaño. Firstly, I have proposed an anthropological perspective on the role of the writer. In particular, this is the idea of the role of the writer as a cultural mediator. I have suggested that the notion of cultural

mediation is especially useful because it succeeds in grasping both advances in Literary Studies and specificities of contemporary Latin American literary culture. At the basis of the notion of cultural mediation is the assumption that works of literature are part of the constant process of interaction/communication between writers and their societies or/and cultures.

Then, I have presented three main issues which can be distinguished in relation to the dialogue between Latin American writers and their societies in the second half of the twentieth century. The first issue concerns the conditions in which this dialogue has been taking place. It has been suggested that, on the one hand, Latin American literary culture is traditionally one of excellence which means that a Latin American work of literature has great chances of influencing readers' course of actions; also it has been noted that Latin American literary culture covers a vast territory which means that a Latin American work of literature may reach a very big number of readers; finally, it has been pointed out that the figure of the Latin American writer has traditionally been imbued with a high status; hence, writers are participants in society whose voice is respected. On the other hand, it has been suggested that the communication between Latin American writers and their societies has often been marked by the climate of hostility. Reminding the fact that in the second half of the twentieth century writers have frequently been subjects of state disapproval and/or repression may help to give account for one of the roles that the Latin American writer has come to play – the role of a speaker against the nation-state and official culture.

The second issue about the dialogue between Latin American writers and their societies is related to its content; in particular, it has been suggested that one of the main themes of this dialogue have been exile, displacement and migration. This can be put in another way as well: many Latin American writers in the second half of the twentieth century had to abandon (or decided to abandon) their home countries (and respectively their societies); so they experienced an urge to define their relationships with their societies. As a result exile, displacement and immigration became frequent themes in Latin American literature. Several ways to view the condition of being away from one's home country have been presented in this chapter. It has been suggested that one of these ways is to view exile as inherent to literature and writing (the paradigm of extraterritoriality). It can be speculated that by insisting on being away, beyond or outside any society by default, writers such as Cortázar have resisted to being bound to comply with the rules, laws, politics and ways of seeing the world of their societies; It is also curious that writers who have not lived in their home countries have been virtually present there with their works of literature. So, that something as a virtual community of writers who have identified themselves as Latin Americans and who have viewed Latin America from outside has probably been present in every particular Latin American country.

The final issue about the dialogue between Latin American writers and their societies is related to the sense of purpose as seen by writers and by their societies (including literary critics). It has been shown that sometimes what is "political commitment" for some is "autonomy" for others.

Chapter 2: Textual forms (unexpected narratives)

2.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter it has been suggested that the role of the writer from an anthropological perspective is to mediate the cultural imaginary. Naturally, the means that writers use to convey the cultural imaginary are works of literature. Also, the particular textual model (novel, essay, poetry), creates a set of expectations in the reader about to what he or she may find in the text. Moreover, some textual forms are seen as more “socially committed” than others. For example, it is not likely for a reader to expect a treatment of a political problem in a detective novel, for this genre is usually associated with entertainment. In contrast, the textual form of the testimonio is usually seen as a “socially committed” textual form, a text giving voice to a marginalized person. Therefore, depending on the genre of the literary work, readers may draw inferences about the ways in which a writer envisions his or her social role.

The aim of this chapter is to provide an overview of the textual forms of archival fiction, testimonio, and detective novel. I have chosen these particular textual forms because, as I shall show in *Chapters 5 and 6*, in Bolaño’s narratives are present elements from all the above genres.

2.2 Archival fiction

In *Myth and Archive* (1990) and in the article “The Making of the Latin American Novel” (2004) Roberto González Echevarría proposes an innovative way to view on the Latin American novel. The author’s purpose is to develop an overarching theory about

the development of the Latin American novel. One of the most interesting statements that he makes is about the relation of literary discourse to non-literary discourses. In his view, “the relationships that the narrative establishes with non-literary forms of discourse are much more productive and determining than those it has with its own tradition, with other forms of literature or with the brute factuality of history” (González Echevarría 2004, 289). That is why, in his view, it is not enough to treat narrative as if it were a self-contained form of discourse, or a mere reflection of sociopolitical conditions. In Echevarría’s view, the Latin American narrative tradition:

is generated in relation to three manifestations of Western hegemonic discourses: the law in the Colonial period, the scientific writings of the many Naturalists who ranged over the American continent in the nineteenth century, and anthropology, which supplies a dominant version of Latin American culture in the modern period both through the writings of Europeans and through the discourse of the state in the form of institutes of folklore, museums, and the like. (Echevarría 2004, 298)

In the twentieth century, the Latin American novel established a productive relationship with the hegemonic discourse of anthropology. According to González Echevarría, anthropology-derived knowledge supplied “the Latin American narrative with a source of stories, as well as a master narrative about Latin American history. In fiction Latin American history will now be cast in the form of myth, a form derived from anthropological studies”(292). The most important development of textual form relying on the discourse of anthropology as a source of stories is “archival fiction”. Archival fiction develops simultaneously with (or as the author implies as a response to) the

epistemological crisis in anthropology which culminated, with Clifford Geertz's announcement of "epistemological hypochondria".¹⁸

This uncertainty about the legitimacy of anthropological knowledge was transferred to fiction. While earlier fictions "dialogued" with the discourse of anthropology, archival fictions were highly self-reflexive forms, which turned back "onto earlier narrative to reveal their literariness, rather than the validity of their knowledge about culture, annulling the anthropological mediation by showing it was a literary conceit all along (González Echevarría 2004, 292) In this way, archival fictions became a sort of anthropological discourse. In turn, later forms of archival fiction turned to this metadiscourse to become meta-metadiscourse. The paradigmatic texts of "archival fiction" are some of the main text of the Boom period. In particular, *Cien años de soledad* (1967) is considered to be the novel that "recovers the three previous mediations and hypostatizes their collecting function in the figure of the archive" (González Echevarría 2004, 299). For the author, archival fictions are the key for understanding and interpreting Latin American narrative in general. Or, as he formulates it:

These archival fictions, which are my hermeneutical model, constitute in some ways a dialogue between Foucault and Bakhtin, a counterpoint of prison and carnival. (299)

There are several characteristic feature of archival fiction. First, this sort of narrative refers to "knowledge gathering activities" and in particular to the "accumulation of

¹⁸ Clifford Geertz, *The interpretation of Cultures. Selected Essays* (Sanford: Stanford U P, 1973).

knowledge and the way in which knowledge is organized as culture” (González Echevarría 2004, 301). That is why archival fictions “contain” other fictions, historical documents and characters, songs, poetry, scientific reports, literary figures and myths, or as González Echevarría describes it: archival fictions display “a grab-bag of texts that have cultural significance” (301). In this sense, archival fictions are both voluminous and incomplete. Further, archival narratives “still attempt to define the cipher of Latin American culture and identity” (299). Moreover, history in archival fictions is presented as “a series of high points common to the whole continent and reducible to a single, shared. Finally, the crucial characteristic of archival fiction is that they display the non-assimilated mediation with other sources/subjects. Or, as the author defines it:

this basic function of the archive to generate an inchoate, heteroglossic mass—a mass of documents and other texts that have not been totally (and sometimes not even partially) absorbed, that retain their raw, undisturbed original existence as evidence of the non-assimilation of the Other. (González Echevarría 2004, 300)

This non-assimilation of the Other provokes “a pluralism that is a subversion or subversion of the master plot” (302) created by the Other. González Echevarría concludes that

...Hence the archive is not a Bakhtinian carnival, but if it is, it takes place within the confines of Foucault’s prison. (303)

According to the author, archival fiction is still the most widespread model for the Latin American novel. He maintains that this sort of fiction continues to be produced in Latin

America and he gives as an example *Noticias del Imperio*(1987) by Fernando del Paso. However, González Echevarría sees an attempt to “break” the model of archival fiction. The author predicts that if any form of discourse will come to take the place of anthropological discourse this is likely to be the discourse of communication systems.

The disadvantage of the theory of González Echevarría is the disadvantage of all all-encompassing theories: it can be accused of reductionism. On the other hand, it is very valuable because it accounts for the so called “intellectual climate” of a given epoch. I am doubtful about the possibility to categorize all novels produced in Latin America, or even the majority of the novels as “archival”, since the evidence for this are insufficient: the author discusses very well known examples which constitute the canon of Latin American literature, but one cannot conclude that these cases are necessarily representative for all the novels created. Nevertheless, the theory of González Echevarría is very useful in at least two ways: 1) the figure of “archive” is a powerful descriptive tool; and 2) the emphasis he puts on the dialogue of literature with other non-literary discourses opens new possibilities for interpreting the texts of Bolaño, as I shall show.

2.3 Testimonio

The next textual form of particular interest for my study is the testimonio. Since the publication of Miguel Barnett’s *Biografía de un cimarrón* (1966) many testimonial texts were published. In general, testimonios have provoked heated debates in the academia in relation to their truth claims, their literariness and their authorship. For example, *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú*(1982), the testimonio of the Guatemalan human rights activist

Rigoberta Menchú has triggered a lot of discussions about its representation of reality, and the “real” life story of its protagonist.¹⁹ Moreover, it is noteworthy that, partly due to the popularity gained with the publication of this text, Rigoberta Menchú was awarded a Nobel Prize for *peace* in 1992. It is especially interesting that despite the debates (or maybe because of them) testimonios quickly came to be seen as an important part of the Latin American literary canon. There are several characteristic features of testimonio that will be outlined below.

The first problem posed by the testimonio is how to define which text should be categorized as such and which not. Should non-fictional novels, autobiographies and diaries, for example, be considered as testimonios? According to Elzbieta Sklodowska (2004), the key criterion for defining a narrative as testimonio is its mediatedness. The definition which she finds most suitable is the one presented by Beverly and Zimmerman (1990).²⁰ They consider testimonios to be narratives whose production “involves the recording and/or transcription and editing of an oral account by an interlocutor who is a journalist, writer, or a social activist” (73). The first remarkable aspect of this definition is that the textual form is defined in terms of its mode of *production*, rather than in terms of its formal qualities. The second striking feature of Beverly and Zimmerman’s characterization is the requirement for the interlocutor to belong to a certain guild (of writers, journalists, social activists).

¹⁹ See for example, Georg M. Gugelberger, ed., *The Real Thing: Testimonial Discourse in Latin America* (Durham and London: Duke U P).

²⁰ John Beverly and Mark Zimmerman, *Literature and Politics in the Central American Revolutions* (Austin: U of Texas P, 1990).

The second issue in relation to the testimonio is who its author is. As Sklodowska puts it:

The lack of normative models is such that dealing with texts labeled as testimonios or “testimonial novels” is like dealing with multiple selves, and we have to develop a set of instruments for each text under scrutiny by teasing out its formal components. (Sklodowska 2004, 202)

The “multiple selves” are in any case at least two: the person who spells out his or her story, and the person who records, transcribes and edits the story. The mediated character of the testimonio implies that there is always somebody who asks particular questions and receives particular answers. Thus, this mediator selects particular bits of narrative, structures them and creates a coherent story. Who is the author of the text then: the person who tells the story or the person who transcribes it? Whatever is decided about the authorship of the text, the question remains: in case that there are two people involved in the production of a text, can this text be regarded as the true story of the protagonist (the one who tells the story)? Most scholars nowadays would agree that the “truth” of testimonio is produced rather than told (see Sklodowska 2004, 205).

The third issue raised by the testimonio is how to interpret it. The people whose stories are narrated in the testimonio are invariably marginalized, and usually excluded from official historiography. To put it differently, a characteristic feature of the testimonio is its urge to give voice to those who have been silenced and to “correct” the discourse

created by official historiography. Further, the testimonio was canonized in the academia “as a unique literary form, one that represents both the creative vitality of Latin American culture and its power to change the paradigm of subaltern representation” (Skłodowska 2004, 198).

Testimonial narratives can be seen as creating a space where narratives that find no other place in society, can be told. Then, should preference be given to the fact that testimonio is an arena where marginalized voices have the opportunity to speak out, or to its formal qualities? This question is in a way similar to the issue about the work of exiled authors raised in *Chapter 1* (see pp. 26-30). There, I cited Hernan Valdés who maintained that the literary works of exiled authors considered “exiled” created different expectation than the work or the non-exiled authors; and the texts of the former were subjected to “humanitarian” interpretations. In my view, Valdés’s reflections are relevant for testimonial narrative as well.

The last issue that I would like to note here is the issue of reception. In order to give an account for the canonization of testimonio in the academia, Skłodowska turns to the “epistemologic hypochondria” announced by Clifford Geertz in the field of anthropology in the 1970s and to the revolutionary claims of Hayden White that the activity of the historians at the end is that of producing narratives. In this intellectual climate, the testimonio can be seen as the right textual form that emerged at the right moment.

2.4 Latin American detective fiction

The next textual form which is of interest for the present study is detective fiction and especially the developments of the genre in the second half of the twentieth century. As Ana María Amar Sánchez (2004) points out, this period can be seen as the “culmination of a process of expansion of popular narrative that began more than two centuries earlier” (599) The (imaginary) boundary between “highbrow” and “lowbrow” textual forms was destabilized and conflicting narratives struggled to “legitimize them as privileged forms of representation”(599). Especially distinctive for this period is the appropriation of images and conventions associated with mass culture. The relationship of detective fiction to images and conventions that belong to “other zones of culture” is my main interest here.

The first characteristic of the Latin American detective novel that I would like to mention is the marginalization of the figure of the detective. While in the classical English model the detective is the one who knows more than the reader, and he/she is supposed to surprise the reader with his/her insight, in the Latin American version of the detective novel the detective in fact knows less than the reader. Amar Sánchez points out that the detective’s “lack of knowledge and control over the situation means the disappearance of the main characteristic of the classic detective, who, in whichever variant of the formula is the one who knows” (604). For example, in the novel *Agosto* (1990) by Rubem Fonseca the detective not only knows less than the reader, but is unable to exercise any power.

The second feature that distinguishes the Latin American detective novel is the “disintegration of certainties” (Amar Sánchez 2004, 600). The premises of the classical English detective novel are that the crime will be revealed, punishment executed and justice will take place. In contrast, in the Latin American variation resolving the crime and restoring justice are deemed impossible. Amar Sánchez gives as an example the novel *Los albañiles* (1962) by Vicente Leñero. This novel has the form of a complex of confessions to the detective by probable assassin and it “underlines the impossibility of achieving any kind of certainty and stresses the failure of the search in which detective and reader are equally matched” (600). In this sense, *Los albañiles* subverts the idea that the detective novel is supposed to offer an unproblematic and easy reading. On the contrary, as Amar Sánchez puts it “solid and tranquilizing reading definitely explodes” (600). Because of the disintegration of certainties and the constant violation of code systems characteristic for the genre, the reader’s expectations are deceived by the text and the narrative is not anymore something to be “consumed”, but rather it provokes questions without providing answers to them.

The third distinctive feature of Latin American crime fiction is the high politicization of crime and the fact that the crimes occur in “real world” settings. Amar Sánchez points out that the “unresolved crime” model is not an exclusive invention of Latin American detective fiction; such a model is also characteristic for the so called North American “hard-boiled” novels of authors such as Dashiell Hammet. Unlike the “hard-boiled”, however, many of the Latin American detective novels are linked to particular historical moments. For example, *Operación Massacre* (1957) by Rodolfo Walsh is a borderline case between investigative journalism and detective novels and examines the case of a

secret operation which involved the capturing and shooting of Peronist militants in 1956 in Argentina.

The next characteristic quality of Latin American detective fiction which should be noted is its capacity to appropriate, destabilize and parody other genres. In her discussion of Roberto Arlt's work, Amar Sánchez succeeds in succinctly describing these properties. According to her "One could say that his work uses the structures of a number of genres to create a text that, in fact, breaks with them (and their ideological function; it exploits them, only to disarm them immediately"(598). Among the genres appropriated by the traditionally "lowbrow" detective fiction are genres which have usually been considered "highbrow". Hence, this appropriation and parody destabilizes such oppositions as avant-guard/ mass or vulgar/sophisticated.

One of the "highbrow" genres with which the Latin American detective novel has established a very interesting relationship is the genre of history. A very important observation that Ana María Amar Sánchez makes is that Latin American detective fiction more than any other narrative form functions as a historical narrative. As she puts it:

Within its confines, a balance has been achieved in constructing the chronicle of the last thirty years of Latin American political life. A code that is possibly one of the most formalized and fictional represents specifically what is either not spoken about in other forms of discourse or not easy to discuss. (Amar Sánchez 2004, 606)

Her conclusion is that detective fiction serves as a forum where the possibility for truth and justice is discussed. This is to say that the social function of the detective novel has changed.

2.5 Conclusions

In section *2.2 Archival fiction* an overarching theory of the evolution of the Latin American novel was presented. The main assumption behind this theory is that the most important and interesting relationships that literary narrative establishes is not with other literary discourses, but with non-literary ones. Anthropology is seen as the hegemonic non-literary discourse with which the Latin American novel establishes a relationship. I will show in *Chapters 5 and 6* that Roberto Bolaño's narratives may also be considered archival fictions.

In section *2.3 Testimonio*, some of the most important discussions provoked by this textual form have been briefly outlined. These discussions are related to the authorship, the truth claims, the "politics" of interpretation and reception of testimonio. In my discussion of Bolaño's novels *La literatura nazi en América* and *Los detectives salvajes* in *Chapters 5 and 6* respectively, I will show in which ways the text makes use of the form of testimonio.

In section *2.4 Detective novel*, the most recent developments of this textual form have been shown. These developments are the following: marginalization of the figure of the detective, disintegration of certainties and deceiving the reader's expectation, politicization of crime, and taking on the function of historical narrative. In *Chapter 6*, I

will show how *Los detectives salvajes*, by adopting elements from the detective novel succeeds in thematizing the role of the writer.

PART II

Chapter 3: Roberto Bolaño: (literary) life and works

The purpose of this chapter is to provide biographical information about Roberto Bolaño and to briefly outline the history of publication and reception of his works. The main source of information used is the official website of Roberto Bolaño, hosted by the Spanish cultural portal www.clubcultura.com²¹. The main source of the Roberto Bolaño's publishing history is the article "Vida editorial de Roberto Bolaño" (2005) written by his editor Jorge Herralde. Therefore, this information is not based on an original research. Assuming that the English (Dutch)-speaking reader might not be familiar with Roberto Bolaño's life and works I opted for including this chapter in my thesis in the hope that will contribute to better understand his work.

In what follows, I would like to look at the construction of Roberto Bolaño's life story. Following the necessity to divide human life into periods and to mark the "turning points" one could end up with diverse divisions of Roberto Bolaño's life. It is suggested here that we divide the biography into two main periods: the first one encompasses the

²¹ Club Cultura is one of the biggest cultural portals in Spain. It is an initiative of Fnac España. (see Triana-Toribio 2008).

years since his birth till the beginning of the 90s and the second - from the beginning of the 90s till the untimely death of Roberto Bolaño in 2003.

Let's first have a look at the "facts" about Roberto Bolaño's life as presented in the website www.clubcultura.com. Roberto Bolaño was born on the 28 April, 1953 in Santiago de Chile. His family lived in different Chilean towns: Quilpué, Cauquenes, Viña del Mar y Los Ángeles. In 1968 Bolaño's family migrated to Mexico, for unknown reasons. Whatever these motives might have been, Bolaño admits that he was fascinated by Mexico City:

Llegué a los quince años a México y fue alucinante. No sé si ocurre en otras ciudades, pero el DF es totalmente autosuficiente, no necesitas salir de ahí. (Bolaño cited in www.clubcultura.com)

The teenager Bolaño left school and pursued an alternative form of education. ²²The writer was dedicated to going to the movies and reading books which he had very often stolen. This situation was later depicted in the short story *El gusano* (1997).

In the summer of 1973, traveling by sea and land, Bolaño returned to Chile in order to support the government of Salvador Allende, the first democratically elected communist president in world history. However, as is well known, on 11 September 1973 the military coup d'état took place and Augusto Pinochet's government seized the power.

Many years later in an interview, Bolaño would claim that he was arrested and spent

²² In order to better understand Bolaño's fascination with Mexico City one should bare in mind that the metropolis is traditionally considered as one of the most vital centers of Latin American literary culture. In the 60's the capital of Mexico was known for its vibrant cultural life. (see Monsiváis 2004).

eight days in prison because he was considered a Mexican terrorist. He was then released as two of the prison's guards turned out to be his ex-classmates. Later on, this episode was used as the basis for the short story *Detectives* (1997).

In the beginning of 1974, after spending several months in Chile, Bolaño returned to Mexico City where he met the poets Mario Santiago and Bruno Montané. The three of them founded a vanguard literary movement named *Infrarrealismo*. This movement issued two manifestos: *Déjenlo todo, nuevamente: primer manifiesto infrarrealista* and *Manifiesto infrarrealista* (1975). *Por un arte de vitalidad sin límites*. The second manifesto gives a somber picture of the situation of intellectuals in the 1970s:

Situación presente

Esta es la gravedad de nuestro siglo: LA GENTE ESTÁ ENFERMA DE CORDURA Y SENSATEZ.

Todos los conformistas sufren de cordura y sensatez.

La cordura y la sensatez destruyen la imaginación del ser humano y lo reducen a un plano objetual en el que permanece cotidianamente reproduciendo una vida miserable; el individuo es aplastado por su propia impotencia y conformismo para hacer nada:

—los hambrientos dejan pasar el pan frente a sus narices;

—los artistas piensan que el arte se termina cuando los publican o exponen sus obras;

—los amantes se niegan a aventurarse buscando nuevas respuestas al amor;

—los “pensadores” se dedican todo el tiempo a buscar epítetos con los cuales denigrar sus detractores;

—las corrientes políticas se consideran “Demiurgos” con sus teorías inmediatistas, apráxicas, ante la realidad social;

—y un millón-por-segundo de etcéteras más. (Bolaño 1975a)

The following citation from the first manifesto provides in a nutshell the ideology of the Infrarrealistas:

Repito:

el poeta como héroe develador de héroes, como el árbol rojo caído que anuncia el principio del bosque.

-Los intentos de una ética-estética consecuente están empedrados de traiciones o sobrevivencias patéticas.

-Y es que el individuo podrá andar mil kilómetros pero a la larga el camino se lo come.

-Nuestra ética es la Revolución, nuestra estética la Vida: una-sola-cosa. (Bolaño 1975)

In addition to announcing Octavio Paz for their “main enemy”, the group published various magazines such as *Rimbaud vuelve a casa*, and *Correspondencia Infra*, which had the subtitle *Revista Menstrual del Movimiento Infrarrealista*, and whose first and only number was issued in October/November 1977. In 1975 the Infrarrealistas issued also the anthology *Poetas infrarrealistas mexicanos*, in which Bolaño did not participate because of his Chilean nationality. In 1976 the Publishing House *Asunción Sanchís* issued the book *Pájaro de calor*. In *Pájaro de calor* took part the following poets: José Vicente Anaya, Mara Larrosa, Cuauhtemoc Méndez, Bruno Montané, Rubén Medina, José Peguero, Mario Santiago and Roberto Bolaño.

In 1979 the Mexican Publishing House *Extemporáneos* issued the anthology *Muchachos Desnudos bajo el arcoiris de fuego. Once jóvenes poetas latinoamericanos*.

The selection of poems was made by Bolaño and works by the following poets were included: Luis Suardíaz, Hernán Lavín Cerda, Jorge Pimentel, Orlando Guillén, Beltrán

Morales, Fernando Nieto Cadena, Julián Gómez, Enrique Verástegui, and the Infrarrealistas Roberto Bolaño, Mario Santiago and Bruno Montané. The edition was presented by Efraín Huerta and the prologue written by Miguel Donoso Pareja. This year Bolaño definitely disengaged with the movement Infrarrealismo. As Bolaño later put it in an interview:

Me excluí [del movimiento que había fundado] al cabo de pocos años. Yo creo que estos grupos, pues no están mal, pueden ser divertidos, incluso tienen una función que cumplir, pero únicamente en la medida en que conservan el sentido del humor. Si el humor se pierde, pues entonces estamos otra vez en las puertas de la iglesia y por ahí yo no paso. (Bolaño cited in www.clubcultura.com)

The Infrarrealismo movement later becomes the basis for the Visceralismo Real in the novel *Los detectives Salvajes* which will be examined in *Chapter 5*. Many of the characters of the novel have as prototypes some of the poets mentioned above. The ideas and the publishing enterprises of the Infrarrealistas become fictionalized in *Los detectives salvajes*. For, example, the poet Mario Santiago is the prototype for the protagonist Ulises Lima, Juan Esteban Harrington is the possible prototype for the character of Juan García Madero, and Roberto Bolaño fictionalized himself as the character of Arturo Belano.

In 1977 Roberto Bolaño left México. He undertook various trips in Europe and Africa. To make a living Bolaño performed diverse occupations. As the writer put it:

Hice de todo, evidentemente: lavaplatos, camarero, vigilante nocturno, basurero, descargador de barcos, vendimiador, en Barcelona, en Francia, en un montón de sitios. Y me pareció

magnífico. Además, en aquella época no había el paro que hubo después y la movilidad laboral era realmente grande. (Bolaño 1998)

In 1978 Bolaño arrived in Barcelona. There, together with the ex- Infrarrealista Bruno Montané they founded a small Publishing House named *Rimbaud Vuelve a Casa Press*. In 1983 the Publishing House issued several numbers of the magazine *Bérthe Trépat*, (entitled in the name of the pianist who appears in Julio Cortazár's *Rayuela*). In the magazine were published for the first time poems by Enrique Lihn, Claudio Bertoni and Diego Maquieira, among others. The same year *Rimbaud Vuelve a Casa Press* published *Regreso a la Antártida*, a collection of poems by Alberto Gallero, Bruno Montané y Roberto Bolaño, and also pictures, photographs, and engravings by Luis Hermosilla, Alvaro Montané y Macarena Infante.

In 1980 Bolaño moved to Gerona, Spain.

In 1984 Bolaño published his first novel, which was written together with the writer Antoni García Porta. The novel was entitled *Consejos de un discípulo de Morrison a un fanático de Joyce*. It was awarded with the Premio Ámbito Literario de Narrativa.

In 1983 works by both Montané and Bolaño were included in the anthology *Entre la lluvia y el arco iris*, compiled by Soledad Bianchi and issued by *Ediciones del Instituto para el Nuevo Chile*.

In 1985 Roberto Bolaño and the Spanish Carolina López married. They have two children – Lautaro Bolaño born in 1990 and Alexandra Bolaño born in 1999.

Before, presenting the (literary) life of Roberto Bolaño in the 1990's I would like to make two points. Firstly, long before Roberto Bolaño became famous he was engaged in writing and in (clandestine) publishing and the fact that the Latin American literary establishment was not familiar with his work is most probably due to the counter-official culture ideology of the writer. The movement Infrarrealismo is a clear sign for this position. Although, there is no information about the "literary ideology" of Bolaño after his disengagement with Infrarrealismo, some speculations about it could be made. Looking at the variety and the nature of the occupations of Bolaño in the late 1970s and in the 1980s it might be inferred that the writer consciously distanced himself from any type of cultural institutions.

The second point that I would like to make is related to the so called "life story" of Roberto Bolaño. As noted in the beginning of this chapter one of the main sources for the information provided in this text is the official website of Roberto Bolaño hosted by www.clubcultura.com. Also, as evidenced above all of the (literary) life events listed are later fictionalized in the works of the writer. This is not to say, however that the life of Roberto Bolaño is fictionalized, a myth that Bolaño himself seemed to promote. It seems more precise to say that the (literary) life events listed above are the ones that are fictionalized. In many of his interviews, Bolaño confirmed that, for example, the book stealing episode from the short story *El gusano* (1997), is a real fact of his life; or that he was really released from prison in 1973 because the guards were his ex-classmates; or that the Infrarrealismo movement was baptized as Real Visceralismo in *Los detectives salvajes*. However, although some of Bolaño's books share a very intimate tone, the

writer never revealed intimate information about himself or his characters. In this sense, it can be assumed that Bolaño followed an ethics of privacy.

In 1993 Bolaño published the collection of poetry *Los perros románticos*. The collection was awarded with the Premio Literario Ciudad de Irún, Spain. Bolaño published the novel *La pista de hielo* which also won the Premio Alcalá de Henares. The writer declared in an interview that from this point on he was able to live exclusively on his literary production (Bolaño 2001, 25 April).

La literatura nazi en América was published in 1996 and in a sense defined a turning point in Roberto Bolaño's career. Jorge Herralde, the editor of Anagrama, expounds that his collaboration with Roberto Bolaño started with *La literatura nazi en América*. In 1995, Bolaño sent his novel to Anagrama novel contest organized annually by the Publishing House. Meanwhile, Bolaño also sent his novel to Alfaguara, Destino, Plaza Janés and Seix Barral. The first three Publishing Houses refused to publish it. However, Bolaño received a confirmation from Seix Barral that they wanted to publish *La literatura nazi en América*. That is why Bolaño wrote a letter to Jorge Herralde asking him to withdraw the novel from the competition. However, Herralde was already interested in the novel so he invited Bolaño to visit him in Barcelona. Roberto Bolaño and Jorge Herralde meet in Barcelona in 1996. After conversing with Herralde Bolaño sent him the manuscript of the novel *Estrella distante* and that was the start of Bolaño's relationship with Anagrama. Jorge Herralde claims that from the first novel which he read, he was sure that Bolaño was an extraordinary narrator. (Herralde 2005, 121-133) In this sense, Bolaño counted on the absolute support of his editor. Also, it is important

to take notice of that the Publishing House Anagrama is considered one of the most prestigious Publishing Houses in Spain and Jorge Herralde editorial work has been highly valued.²³ Thus, it can be said that Bolaño was in good hands and Anagrama contributed positively to the distribution and reception of his works.

From then on Bolaño published at least one book per year with Anagrama. Here is a list of the literary works by Roberto Bolaño: *Estrella distante*(1996) (novel), *La literatura nazi en América*(1996) (novel), *Llamadas telefónicas*(1997) (collection of short stories), *Los detectives salvajes*(1998) (novel), *Amuleto*(1999) (novel), *Nocturno de Chile* (2000) (novel), *Amberes* (2002) (novel), and *Una novelita lumpen* (2002) (novelette).²⁴

With the publication of *Los detectives salvajes* in 1998 Roberto Bolaño became a central figure in the Latin American literary field. In 1999 *Los detectives salvajes* was awarded with the prestigious Premio nacional de literatura Rómulo Gallegos.

In 1998 the writer visited his country of origin, Chile. This visit provoked controversial reactions in the Chilean literary establishment because of the harsh comments Bolaño

²³ Herralde has received various prizes among which: Premio Nacional a la Mejor Labor Editorial Cultural (1994), Premio Targa d'Argento as a European editor (1999), Premio al Mérito Editorial de la Feria del Libro de Guadalajara (2002) and Premio Grinzane-Editores (2005). In addition, Herralde has been awarded with several international prizes among which the Italian Premio Nazionale per la Traduzione del Ministero per i Beni Culturali, and the French Commandeur de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres. (source of information: <http://www.anagrama-ed.es> (consulted in 12 Nov 2008), and <http://www.adrianahidalgo.com/> (consulted in 12 Nov 2008)

²⁴ In addition, Anagrama published posthumously the following works by of Roberto Bolaño: *El gaucho insufrible* (2003)(short stories and essays), *2666* (2004)(novel), *Entre paréntesis* (2004) (essays and chronicles), *La Universidad desconocida* (2005), *El secreto del mal* (2005). Hence, with more than 10 novels published by Anagrama , the writer became part of Anagrama's club of writers (Herralde 2005,121-133)

made in relation to the Nueva Narrativa Chilena²⁵. In any case, (the media) presence of Roberto Bolaño in Chile contributed for the increase of the scholarly/critical interest towards his works. The critics were divided in two camps: those who maintained the necessity to reinstall the works of Bolaño in the Chilean national literary canon, and those who sustained that the work of the writer was generally created for a foreign public and did not display reference to the Chilean cultural space (see Plaza Atenas 2005).

In 2003 Roberto Bolaño died of liver failure.

Chapter 4: The social role of the writer in society as envisioned by Roberto Bolaño

4.1 Introduction

This chapter is based on a reading of Roberto Bolaño's discourses which were published in diverse newspapers and magazines. Two different types of sources are explored: interviews with Bolaño and essays published in magazines and newspapers. The first interviews given by Bolaño date back to 1998. From this point on, the media interest towards Bolaño rapidly increased and by 2003 the number of the interviews was greater than 20. As was explained in *Chapter 3* of this thesis, with the publication of *Los*

²⁵ For a definition of New Chilean Narrative see: Emerson Tropa, "La nueva narrativa chilena: otro intento de aproximación". *Documentos Lingüísticos y Literarios* no. 22 (1999): 61-65, www.humanidades.uach.cl/documentos_linguisticos/document.php?id=406.

detectives Salvajes in 1998 by Anagrama, Bolaño became from a virtually unknown writer to a central figure in the Latin American literary field. The fact that *Los detectives Salvajes* was awarded in 1999 with the Rómulo Gallegos undoubtedly contributed in a positive way to the journalistic interest towards Bolaño. What is more interesting here, however, is the type of interest that the success of the novel generated. As was noted in the introduction of this thesis, almost all of the novels and short stories of Bolaño in one way or another thematize the role of the writers in the society and the Latin American literary field. This surely was noted by the media and Bolaño was repeatedly asked for his opinion about the condition of the Latin American literary field. Indeed, all of the interviews were discussing literary issues. Further, it may be speculated that with regards to the media interest a domino effect most probably was triggered. In all his interviews, Bolaño employed very strong, provocative, charged with humor, language. Also, after his visit to Chile in 1998, Bolaño published a chronicle entitled *Fragmentos de un regreso al país natal* in the Barcelonan magazine *Ajoblanco*. There Bolaño harshly criticized the Chilean literary establishment. This characteristic of Bolaño's way of expressing his (often) radical opinions about the Latin American literary field was most probably quickly noticed by journalists and in turn spurred their interest towards the writer. In other words, Bolaño demonstrated that in addition to being a very talented writer he always had something challenging and intriguing to say about the world of literature. Finally, it is important to underline that the media was interested in Bolaño, but not the other way around. This is to say that there are no indications of Bolaño's using the media as a way of promoting his own works of literature.

While Bolaño did not seem concerned with promoting his own works, he did a lot in order to create interest in other writers' books. In 1999, Bolaño started his column for the Catalan newspaper *Diari de Girona*. Later, in 2000, Bolaño was offered a column in the Chilean newspaper *Las últimas noticias*. So, some of the articles published in *Diari de Girona* were re-published in *Las últimas noticias* and, in addition, Bolaño wrote some text exclusively for the Chilean newspaper. In total the texts written by Bolaño for both newspapers are more than 100.²⁶ In almost all of these short articles Bolaño was discussing the works of other writers. From the correspondence between the writer and Andrés Braithwaite, the editor of the section for culture of *Las últimas noticias*, it becomes clear that, indeed, Bolaño wanted a column in which he could write whatever he wanted. As Bolaño put it:

A mi me gustaría tener una columna en donde pueda hablar del más desconocido poeta provenzal hasta el más conocido novelista polaco, todo lo cual en Santiago sonará por igual a chino. De hecho, estas crónicas, de aquí a un tiempo, conformarán un libro, y por eso quiero meter también las que se publicaron en catalán. No sé si está claro: sería una columna básicamente literaria. (Bolaño 2004, 11)

It was discussed in *Chapter 3* that since 1993 Bolaño lived exclusively on his literary production. In this sense, it is to should not be right to assume that Bolaño needed the collaborations with the newspaper as an additional income. Hence, one cannot suspect that the writer needed to compromise any of his opinions in order to get his column in the newspaper published.²⁷ Thus, although Roberto Bolaño was featured in the public

²⁷ The essays, the chronicles and several speeches for conferences are published in: Roberto Bolaño, *Entre paréntesis. Ensayos, artículos y discursos*, ed. Ignacio Echevarría.(Barcelona: Anagrama, 2004).

space for a very short period (less than 6 years), he succeeded to develop his opinions about the Latin American literary field and maintain his role in it.

4.2. Bolaño: a committed writer?

In *Chapter 1* of this thesis it was shown that among Latin Americanists there is no consensus about what has been the role of the intellectuals/writers at the end of the twentieth century or what such a role should be. On the one hand, according to Mario Valdés, most of the Latin American writers at the end of the twentieth century have participated in a debate that attempted to “heal the wounds” of the post-dictator era in Argentina, Brazil and Chile. On the other hand, according to Lasarte Valcárel at the end of the twentieth century it has become common among writers and intellectuals to criticize the ideas of nation and national identity; and one of the factors that have triggered this criticism, in the author’s view, was the exhaustion of much of political models – from progressive nationalism to orthodox Left-wing ideologies. My purpose in this section is to look at how Bolaño positioned himself in the midst of these controversial debates.

It was shown in *Chapter 3* that the most significant action of Bolaño pro- or against- any political regime was his return to Chile in 1973 in order to support the government of Salvador Allende. After this occasion, although the writer proclaimed himself several times trotskist, he did not participate in any political events. In an interview, Bolaño explained his own political position in the following way:

La única libertad en la que creo es la libertad individual. O en el conjunto de libertades individuales... Y no soy un desencantado de la política, aunque motivos no me faltan ni a mí ni a nadie, pues la política por regla general es un nido de serpientes. Sigo siendo de izquierda y sigo creyendo que la izquierda, desde hace más de sesenta años, mantiene en pie un discurso vacío, una representación hueca que sólo puede sonarle bien (esa catarata de lugares comunes) a la canalla sentimental. En realidad, la izquierda real es la canalla sentimental quintaesenciada. (Bolaño 2003, 3 Jan)

From the quote above, it may be inferred that Bolaño maintained a view, similar to the one presented by Lasarte Valcárel. Bolaño's criticism of the idea of the nation and the writer's relatedness to a nationalistic ideology may also be tracked in his discourses during and after his return to Chile in 1998.

During and after his visit to Chile in 1998 Bolaño harshly criticized the Chilean literary establishment in general and the literary movement Nueva Narrativa Chilena in particular. The article of the Chilean critic Dino Plaza Atenas (2005) aptly describes the big media attention that the return of Bolaño produced. Atenas even writes about a "media phenomenon". The general mood of the first articles published in various Chilean newspapers is that of enthusiasm. Bolaño was repeatedly asked about the conditions in which he left Chile in 1973, why he did not return earlier, whether he felt nostalgic of Chile and so forth. The answers of Bolaño were that he finds the country similar to the one he had left in 1973, that he never felt nostalgia of it, and that he was much more interested in other places.

On the contrary, upon his return to Spain, Bolaño published a chronicle entitled *Fragmentos de un regreso al país natal*. There Bolaño expressed the following opinion about the Chilean literary establishment:

Esto es lo que aprendí de la literatura chilena. Nada pidas que nada se te dará. No te enfermes que nadie te ayudará. No pidas entrar en ninguna antología que tu nombre siempre se ocultará. No luches que siempre serás vencido. No le des la espalda al poder porque el poder lo es todo. No escatimas halagos a los imbéciles, a los dogmáticos, a los mediocres, si no quieres vivir una temporada en el infierno. La vida sigue, aquí, más o menos igual. (Bolaño 2004, 67)

With this statement Bolaño made it publicly clear that he did not want to be recognized as a part of the Chilean national literary canon. In addition, there is no interview where a positive evaluation of the democratic processes that has been taking place in Chile after 1989, nor about the participation of Chilean writers in support of these processes can be found.

Another confirmation for the non-committed view of Roberto Bolaño may be found in his absolute rupture with the boom generation. For example in an interview given for the Chilean magazine *Crítica*, Bolaño put it in the following way:

...no me siento heredero del boom de ninguna manera. Aunque me estuviera muriendo de hambre no aceptaría ni la más mínima limosna del boom, aunque hay escritores muy buenos, que releo a menudo, como Cortázar o Bioy. El boom, al principio, como suele suceder en casi todo, fue muy bueno, muy estimulante, pero la herencia del boom da miedo.

(Bolaño 2001, 11 April)

As the above quote implies, the disapproval of Bolaño surely was not about the purely literary qualities of the boom writers' works. In order to answer the question why Bolaño did not want to be perceived as a successor of the boom, one should consider the political commitment of many of the boom writers. For example, García Márquez is famous for his support of the Cuban dictator Fidel Castro. Also, Cortázar, whose literary works Bolaño, admired, took a controversial position with regard to the Cuban regime. Asked in an interview to discuss the political position of Cortázar, Bolaño put it the following way:

Yo creo que ahí la cagó Cortázar y la gran mayoría, y la cagaron de una manera bestial. El hecho de que fueran latinoamericanos de alguna manera les perdonabas más que a los demás. Es difícil, porque, por ejemplo, hubo muchos trotskos que se exiliaron en Cuba, y los cubanos no se portaron mal con ellos. Hubo muchas guerrillas de gente que no estaba con el socialismo real, claramente, que fueron a poyadas también por Cuba. Además, la atmósfera de aquellos años era apocalíptica en el sentido de San Juan, en el sentido cristiano. Todos esperábamos o el estallido de la revolución o el estallido de la contrarrevolución. El Día del Juicio era algo que se respiraba. El miedo a ese día evidentemente te hace buscar, al menos mentalmente, una pared donde apoyarte, por puro miedo. Al final no tuvimos ninguna pared donde apoyarnos y nos fue como nos fue, evidentemente, pero yo creo que sólo así se explica lo de Cuba y lo de Cortázar. (Bolaño 1998, April)

On the basis of the radical criticism expressed by Bolaño with regards to the Nueva Narrativa Chilena, and to the boom generation it may be inferred that the writer was opposed to the idea of committed art; or at least that he was skeptical about the capacity of art to trigger change in society.

However, the speech which Bolaño pronounced at the reception of the Premio internacional de novela Rómulo Gallegos seems to be a declaration about the inherent relationship between the quality of a work or art and its ethical dimension:

...¿Entonces qué es un escritura de calidad? Pues lo que siempre ha sido: saber meter la cabeza en lo oscuro, saber saltar al vacío, saber que básicamente la literatura es un oficio peligroso.

(Bolaño 2004, 36)

Later, in various interviews Bolaño further developed and confirmed the view of the profession of the writer as an “oficio peligroso”. For example, in the interview given by Bolaño for the Argentinean newspaper *Clarín*, he defined his own literary project in the following way:

Para mí la literatura no sólo es una elección estética, sino también una apuesta ética. Yo no intento conciliar a la izquierda con la derecha. Para mí la literatura traspasa el espacio de la página llena de letras y frases y se instala en el territorio del riesgo, yo diría del riesgo permanente. La literatura se instala en el territorio de las colisiones y los desastre.

(Bolaño 2002, 11 May)

Finally, Bolaño seemed to maintain a stance on the need of the writer not only to be committed but to be consistent both in his views and in his deeds. In several discourses, Bolaño expressed his admiration for Latin American intellectuals who achieved a high level of integrity in terms of public opinions and actions. For example, Bolaño declares that his speech at the reception of the Premio Rómulo Gallegos is dedicated to Domingo Miliani. From Bolaño’s point of view Domingo Miliani “encarna la figura canónica del

intelectual latinoamericano, que lo ha leído todo y que lo ha vivido todo y que encima de todo es bueno” (Bolaño 2004, 31).

4.3 Bolaño: autonomous writer?

Los premios, los sillones (en la Academia), las mesas, las camas, hasta las bacinicas de oro son, necesariamente, para quienes tienen éxito o bien se comporten como funcionarios leales y obedientes. (Bolaño 2004, 103)

Era pobre, vivía en la intemperie y me consideraba un tipo con suerte porque, a fin de cuentas, no había enfermado de nada grave. Abusé del sexo pero nunca contraí una enfermedad venérea. Abusé de la lectura pero nunca quise ser un autor de éxito. (Bolaño 2004, 148)

It is a very remarkable fact that Roberto Bolaño, who quickly came to be called the best Latin American writer of his generation (see Labari 2003) and who achieved a very high status in the Latin American literary field, remained very skeptical and even negative towards social recognition and success. For example, when asked in an interview whether the fact that he was awarded one of the most prestigious literary prizes in Chile (el premio del Consejo Nacional del Libros) mattered for him, Bolaño responded in the following way:

No me importa nada. Ni ser reconocido en el terruño ni ser reconocido en el extranjero. El narrador más importante de este siglo que se acaba (¡por fin!) se llamó Franz Kafka y no lo reconocieron ni en su casa, así que figúrate si me va a preocupar a mí una gilipollez de ese calibre. (Bolaño 1999, May)

Further, Bolaño described success as one of the most overestimated social values nowadays. (Bolaño 2000, 19 Feb) The essay *Los mitos de Chtulhu* launched a fierce critique against the notion of literary success and offered in a nutshell the philosophy of Bolaño in relation to the social success of the writer:

La literatura, sobre todo en Latinoamérica, y sospecho que también en España, es éxito, éxito social, claro, es decir es grandes tirajes, traducciones a más de treinta idiomas (yo puedo nombrar veinte idiomas, pero a partir del idioma número 25 empiezo a tener problemas, no porque crea que el idioma número 26 no existe sino porque me cuesta imaginar una industria editorial y unos lectores birmanos temblando de emoción con los avatares mágico-realistas de Eva Luna), casa en Nueva York o Los Ángeles, cenas con grandes magnatarios (para que así descubramos que Bill Clinton puede recitar de memoria párrafos enteros de *Huckleberry Finn* con la misma soltura con que el presidente Aznar lee a Cernuda), portadas en *Newsweek* y anticipos millonarios. (Bolaño 2003, 170)

As the above quote implies, for Bolaño writer's success is associated with: 1) servility to political ideologies and to the strong of the day, 2) dependence on the demands of the market, and 3) exploitation of particular clichés about Latin America. I would like to focus on the second point. It seemed that Bolaño saw the complexity of the problem with market dependency. On the one hand, such a dependency meant for Bolaño that contemporary writers have lost their role of opponents to the governing ideologies in their societies and their goal has instead become to take a higher position in the existing social order, rather than to subvert or criticize it. On the other hand, the dependency on the market meant that writers have converted their literary works to products that need to be promoted so that their sales could increase. As Bolaño put it:

No rechazan la respetabilidad. La buscan desesperadamente. Para llegar a ella tienen que transpirar mucho. Firmar libros, sonreír, viajar a lugares desconocidos, sonreír, hacer de payaso en los programas del corazón, sonreír mucho, sobre todo no morder la mano que les da de comer, asistir a ferias de libros y contestar de buen talante las preguntas más cretinas, sonreír en las peores situaciones, poner cara de inteligentes, controlar el crecimiento demográfico, dar siempre las gracias. (Bolaño 2003, 173)

It goes without saying that literary institutions play an important role for the promotion of (or lack of such) of a given writer, and that writer's success and position in society depend to a certain extent on institutions such as publishing houses, the academia, prize giving institutions and so forth; therefore, given the views of Bolaño about success, it is not surprising that he rejected almost all literary institutions.

The criticism of Bolaño against literary institutions is developed along three main lines: 1) the insufficient attention towards the texts which supposedly compete for a given prize, 2) the inadequate criteria employed by the juries in judging the merits of a given author, and 3) the lobbying strategies that are behind the decisions for literary prizes.

First, Bolaño expressed dissatisfaction with the prize giving institutions on the basis that juries do not read the texts carefully enough. The short story entitled *Sensini* (1997) which describes the epistolary communication of two exiled Latin American writers is one of Bolaño's major statements against prize giving institutions. In *Sensini*, both writers earn their living more or less by sending literary texts to different literary contests. The older writer, Sensini, directly declares his frustration by the literary field, claiming that "[e]l mundo de la literatura es terrible. Además de ridículo" (Bolaño 1997, 19). According to Sensini, the juries that distribute the literary prizes are usually

monopolized by “a clique of minor poets and novelists, as well as former laureates”(19). Further, the jurors generally skim through (or even do not read) the entries. That is why Sensini advises his young colleague to send the same story under different names to several literary contests in order to have higher chances of getting a literary prize. Later on, in an interview, Bolaño confirmed that the idea to send the same literary text with different titles to different literary competitions is a strategy which he proved to work (see Bolaño 2001, 11 April).

The second line of Bolaño’s critique against literary institutions is related to the criteria employed in order to decide which writers will have higher positions in the hierarchy of the institution. For example, Bolaño attacked the prestigious Brazilian Academy of Letters for inviting Paulo Coelho as a member of the institution. In Bolaño’s view, the only virtue of Paulo Coelho’s literature is that it sells a lot. Bolaño categorized the idea to include Coelho in the Brazilian Academy of Letters as “ridiculous”. According to Bolaño, the reasoning of the Brazilian Academy of Letters behind the invitation of Paulo Coelho was that the writer had special contributions for the popularization of Brazilian language. This was the target towards which Bolaño directed his arrow:

Como si el idioma brasileño fuera una ciencia infusa, capaz de soportar cualquier traducción, o como si los sufridos lectores del metro de Tokio supieran portugués...¿Por donde íbamos? Por Coelho y la Academia y el sillón que finalmente le dieron gracias, entre otras cosas, a popularizar el “idioma brasileño” a lo largo y ancho del mundo. Francamente, leyendo esto, uno podría llegar a pensar que Coelho tiene un vocabulario (brasileño) comparable al “idioma irlandés” de Joyce. Pero no. La prosa de Coelho, también en lo que respecta a riqueza léxica es pobre. (Bolaño 2004, 103)

Similarly, Bolaño did not spare his critical comments for the jury of the Premio Rómulo Gallegos. As Bolaño's interviews, and also a note published in *Cultura* (Bolaño 2001b) suggest, the writer was invited to participate in the jury of the 2001 edition of the Premio Rómulo Gallegos. At a certain point, Bolaño refused to travel to Caracas because of his bad health. In response to the rumors that he wanted the committee to pay for the travel of his wife and his son, Bolaño published a note that can be qualified as furious. Bolaño accused the members of the jury and the president of CELARG²⁸ of being "comisarios neostalinistas". And the methods for selection of novels to be awarded were regarded by Bolaño as "se parecían demasiado a los argumentos disuasorios de la Casa de las Américas cubana" (Bolaño 2003, 18 July). Finally, Bolaño expressed the radical opinion that even the most prestigious literary prizes are a question of political lobbying, rather than of appreciation of the high quality works of literature. The most prestigious literary prize – the Nobel Prize - was criticized by Bolaño on various occasions.

4.4 Bolaño: an exiled writer?

*...yo jamás me he sentido un exiliado en España, como tampoco
me sentí un exiliado en México, ni en Centroamérica, ni en ningún otro lugar en donde
se hablara español.*(Bolaño 2001, 11 April)

In *Chapter 1* of the present thesis it has been shown that the figure of the Latin American writer as an exiled/displaced/nomadic writer has been very important in Latin

²⁸ Fundación Centro de Estudios Latinoamericanos Rómulo Gallegos

American literary culture, especially in the second half of the twentieth century considering the mass migrations all over the continent. Several ways to view exile were discussed: the paradigm of nostalgia, the paradigm of extraterritoriality, and the paradigm of dual displacement. In *Chapter 3* of this thesis it was shown that Roberto Bolaño spent most of his life outside of his home-country. (This is true regardless if we consider as his “home-country” Chile, Mexico, or both). Hence, in this section my purpose is to see how Bolaño viewed his condition of exile/displacement.

To start with, Roberto Bolaño has often been categorized by (non-Latin American) journalists as a “Chilean exiled poet” (see Lethem 2008). However, Bolaño never spoke of himself as an exiled writer. Asked why he left Mexico, Bolaño always gave an (ironic) explanation that had nothing to do with politics. For example,

En realidad una de las razones por las que me vine es que había roto con mi compañera, la primera chica con la que viví. Me fui porque ya no soportaba tanto desamor, como diría la ranchera. Si me quedaba en México me iba a colgar, sabía que me iba a morir.

(Bolaño cited in www.clubcultura.com)

Further, it should be taken into account that the idea of exile often goes hand in hand with the idea of nation. As was shown in the previous subsection, Bolaño resisted any efforts to be reinstated in the Chilean literary canon. The same goes for the idea of his Chilean nationality. Even further, not only didn't Bolaño feel Chilean, but in various interviews he also refused to be called a Mexican or a Spanish writer. For example, when asked to name his home country in an interview for the Mexican edition of *Playboy*, Bolaño declared that his only “nationality” is the Latin American one (Bolaño 2003, 23

July). This idea is most fully developed in Bolaño's *Discurso de Caracas* ([1999] 2004). Bolaño developed this idea most fully:

No recuerdo su nombre. Tal vez fue un escritor que escribía en español Tal vez fue un escritor que escribía en inglés o francés. La patria de un escritor, dijo, es su lengua....Aunque también es verdad que la patria de un escritor no es su lengua o no es sólo su lengua sino la gente que quiere. Y a veces la patria de un escritor no es la gente que quiere sino su memoria. Y otras veces la única patria de un escritor es su lealtad y su valor. En realidad muchas pueden ser las patrias de un escritor, a veces la identidad de esa patria depende en grado sumo en aquello que en ese momento está escribiendo. (Bolaño 2004, 36)

Finally, in the discourses of Bolaño a view that exile and literature are inherently related can be clearly distinguished. For example, in *Exilio y literatura* (2004) Bolaño expressed his view in the following way:

Existe el inmigrante, el nómada, el viajero, el sonámbulo, pero no el exiliado, puesto que todos los escritores, por el solo hecho de asomarse a la literatura lo son, y todos los lectores, ante el solo hecho de abrir un libro, también lo son. (Bolaño 2004, 51)

From the above statement it may be inferred that Bolaño shared the paradigm of extraterritoriality in relation to exile. Moreover, the writer harshly criticized the paradigm of nostalgia. As was discussed in *Chapter 1*, amongst Latin American writers the paradigm of nostalgia was a widely spread one. Maybe the following is written in response of the popularity of the paradigm of nostalgia:

¿Se puede tener nostalgia por la tierra donde uno estuvo a punto de morir? Se puede tener nostalgia de la pobreza, de la intolerancia, de la prepotencia, de la injusticia? La cantinela, entonada por latinoamericanos y también por escritores de otras zonas depauperadas o

traumatizadas, insiste en la nostalgia, en el regreso al país natal, y a mí eso siempre me ha sonado a mentira. (Bolaño 2004, 43)

This view of Bolaño contra exile can be viewed also from the perspective of the literary market. It was pointed out in *Chapter 1* that the work of the exiled writers is likely to be subjected to another way of reading than the work of a writer who is non-exiled. As Hernan Valdés, the work of the exiles writer is seen from a humanitarian perspective. In this sense, the radical position of Bolaño contra-exile can be viewed as a reaction against the possibility his works to be perceived from a humanitarian perspective. In particular, Bolaño was opposed to the effects produced by the dual displacement of the works of literature.²⁹ As the writer put it:

Hay una escritura muy mala en Latinoamérica, una escritura que por un lado abusa del tipismo, del folclorismo, y que se intenta vender al extranjero como mercadería exótica.

(Bolaño 2000, Dec)

One of Bolaño's most frequent examples of a writer who has been selling her works thanks to presenting them as "mercadería exótica" was the Chilean Isabel Allende. The choice of Bolaño to attack her does not seem random, if one considers that she is one of the most successful Latin American writers in USA, which in turn is the biggest market for Latin American literature outside Latin America. According to Bolaño, Allende is not "escritora" but "escribidora", and "(s)u glamour de sudamericana en California, sus imitaciones de García Márquez, su indudable valentía, su ejercicio de la literatura... va

²⁹ Marcelo Cohen (2002) notes the following in his brief exploration of *Estrella distante*: "Corren rumores que la industria editorial europea necesita un nuevo auge latinoamericano, y muchos novelistas empiezan a prepararse para las pruebas. Bolaño, que parece un buen candidato a beneficiario, terminaría siendo víctima de una operación así, porque en esta novela hay algo novedoso y sentido que un clima de lectura "sudaquista" (incluso en su nueva rama anti-Macondo) haría papilla" (34).

de lo kitsch a lo patético” (Bolaño 2004, 102). Hence, the success of Allende resides in the fact, among other things, that she has been imitating the magical realism of Gabriel García Marquez. In order to understand the stance that Bolaño took, one should consider that the magical realism has been very successful in USA. As was shown in *Chapter 1*, nowadays USA form a substantial part of the market of Latin American literature. In this light, Bolaño’s opinion about Isabel Allende’s as described by Bolaño, receive a new significance. The point that Bolaño implied is that Allende contributed for the establishment of a non-realistic and distorted image of Latin America and Latin Americans. As Bolaño declared in his article *Sobre la literatura, el premio nacional de literatura y los raros consuelos del oficio*:

Es decir, somos seres humanos razonables (pobres, pero razonables), no entelequias salida de un manual de realismo mágico, no postales para consumo externo de y abyecto disfraz interno. Es decir: somos seres que pueden optar en un momento histórico por la libertad y también, aunque resulte paradójico, por la vida. (Bolaño 2004, 97-8)

In short, Roberto Bolaño clearly embraced the paradigm of extraterritoriality in relation to exile. He did not consider himself an exiled or displaced writer. On the contrary, Bolaño insisted that living abroad was his personal choice and that this condition was usual/normal for a writer. In addition, Bolaño saw the popularity of the paradigms of nostalgia as preposterous. Finally, the writer harshly criticized the (ab)use of an exotic image of Latin America as a sales strategy.

4.5 Bolaño: the writer as a mediator?

In *Chapter 1* it has been discussed the idea of the writer as a cultural mediator. I have suggested that “mediation” does not suggest what exactly is mediated. In the sections above, it was shown that Roberto Bolaño acted as a critic of the dependence of writers on the market, their engagement with a given political ideology, and their struggle for market success. However, to say that Bolaño saw his own role as to provide only negative critique about the contemporary Latin American field will not be accurate. Indeed, Bolaño was very strong as a critic; nevertheless, he was an equally strong supporter of those he considered to be “valuable writers”. In this section, I will try to show that Bolaño acted as a mediator between the reader and other writers’ work.

As I noted in the Introduction to this chapter, in 1999 Bolaño started a column for the Catalan newspaper *Diari de Girona*. A year later, Bolaño was offered a column in the Chilean newspaper *Las últimas noticias*. The diversity of the authors discussed by Bolaño in terms of the period in which they lived and their origin is impressive and shows a great erudition. However, none of these texts can be perceived as an exercise in showing off one’s knowledge about a subject (literature in this case). The tone that is common for all the texts is the one of zeal and passion for literature. This passion is easily conveyed to the reader and all the essays serve to provoke people to read the book discussed by Bolaño, to inspire them to learn more about its author. The strategies employed by Bolaño to seduce the reader are diverse. In some cases, Bolaño directly asks the reader to get to know the book in question. For example, in the essay entitled *Wilcock*, in which Bolaño writes about the second Spanish edition of *La sinagoga de los iconoclastas*:

El libro de Wilcock me devolvió la alegría, como sólo pueden hacerlo las obras maestras de literatura que al mismo tiempo son obras maestras del humor negro, como los *Aforismos* de Lichtenberg o el *Tristram Shandy* de Sterne. ... Si quieren reírse, si quieren mejorar su salud, cómprenla, róbenla, pídanla prestada, pero léanla. (Bolaño 2004, 151)

In other essays, Bolaño employs more subtle strategies in order to provoke the interest of the reader, such as creating suspense and mixing the realistic and the biographical with the fantastic. For example the essay entitled *El fantasma de Ángel Plannels* opens in the following way:

Algunas tardes de invierno es posible ver, por el centro de Blanes, al fantasma de Ángel Plannels. Se diría que viene de la casa de sus nonagenarias hermanas y que va a casa de su sobrino el pastelero Joan Plannels, posiblemente la persona que hoy día tiene la mayor colección de su obra. (Bolaño 2004, 130)

In any case, the tone of Bolaño shows great appreciation and respect for the works of literature (or art) he discusses, as well as for their creators. It seems that Bolaño always finds a way to identify the weird, the interesting, the unusual, or the provocative that makes a work of literature a valuable piece that deserves the interest of the reader.

One of the lines pursued by Bolaño has been to promote contemporary Latin American writers who are not considered part of the Latin American canon or writers who are not very well established. Another line is to remind the readers of Latin American writers who are not remembered or read nowadays. A third line that Bolaño followed was to educate the reader about major issues related to literary culture. Such issues are: the literary canon, what makes a good work of literature, what makes a classical author and so forth. Finally, Bolaño provoked the reader to delve into his or her own investigations

in the world of literature. In this sense it may be concluded that one of the values which Bolaño mediated was the value of literature itself.

4.6 Conclusions

The 2nd part of this thesis I have provided biographical information about Roberto Bolaño and I have briefly presented the publishing history of the writer (*Chapter 3*). Then, I have explored the public discourses of the writer. (*Chapter 4*)

In *Chapter 3* it has been shown that during the big part of his life Roberto Bolaño had a marginal position in society. It has been suggested that this position was probably to a big extent a matter of personal choice. One of the clearest examples for Roberto Bolaño's view was the Infrarrealista poetical movement which he founded in the 1970s. The "ideology" of this movement was to subvert official literary culture. As "the main enemy" of the Infrarreaslistas was appointed Octavio Paz, a central figure on the Mexican literary scene. Then, it was shown that after leaving Mexico in the late 1970s Roberto Bolaño disengaged himself with the Ifrarrealismo movement but maintained his position as a marginal counter-official culture writer. Later, after he left México the writer exercised diverse professions in order to make a living. None of these professions was related to writing and/or publishing, a fact which may be related to Bolaño's resistance to work in the frame of whichever "official" literary institution. Also, it has been exposed that in the 1990s by publishing various short story collections and novels, among which *La literatura nazi en América* and *Los detectives salvajes*, Roberto Bolaño changed his marginal position and became a central figure on the Latin

American literary scene. In this sense Bolaño's case may be considered an example of the dual participation of the writer in society. Or more precisely, it may be posed that after a period of cultural and social marginality, a period of cultural centrality followed.

In *Chapter 4*, it has been shown that in the late 1990s Bolaño acquired such a status that he was frequently asked by the media about his literary opinions and that the writer became in a position to define what the valuable work of literature was and what should be the role of the writer in society. Then, it has been discussed that, regardless of becoming a central figure on the Latin American literary scene, the writer maintained a very critical position towards the literary establishment. He expressed negative opinions about the dependency of writers of market success, about the servility of writers to literary institutions, and to political regimes. In addition, it was noted that Bolaño declared himself a trotskist, but after 1973 he never took part in any political event, and did not act as a "speaker" for any political ideology. Finally, it has been posed that the writer maintained the literary paradigm of extraterritoriality and he was strongly opposed against the efforts of the media to attach him the label "exiled writer", or the attempts of the (Chilean) literary establishment to "reinstall" his works in a national literary canon. It was suggested that in this sense, Bolaño can be viewed as an "autonomous writer".

On the other hand, it was suggested that Bolaño may be considered a committed writer as well. According to Bolaño, the writer's profession is a risk one because the writer should be able to "meter la cabeza en la oscuridad" and to "mantener los ojos abiertos". Also, in his view writing is always a matter not only of an aesthetic but also of an

ethical choice. In addition, it was shown that through his articles, essays and interview Bolaño promoted the work of other writers he found valuable. In this sense, it has been suggested that one of the mediating functions which Bolaño fulfilled was to endorse the value of literature itself.

In conclusion, it can be said that Roberto Bolaño envisioned the role of the writer as somebody who provokes and maintains a constant dialogue with the reading public (including writers, readers, and critics) All the interviews, essays, and speeches of Bolaño demonstrate his willingness to start a dialogue with the other. Moreover, all the discourses of Bolaño attempt to raise the readers' awareness that no writer works in isolation from his or her cultural and historical context. As the ample quotes above show, Bolaño very often employed a quite strong, and even insulting, language when criticizing some aspect of the contemporary world of literature. In my view, this language usage is not just a matter of style or taste, but rather it is language that demands a reaction on the part of the reader (or on the part of the target of this critique).

In the 3rd part of this thesis I will look at how the views about the role of the writer are represented in two of Roberto Bolaño's novels, *La literatura nazi en América* and *Los detectives salvajes*.

Chapter 5: *La literatura nazi en América*

5.1 Introduction

La literatura nazi en América (1996) is one of the least studied works of Roberto Bolaño. The most important exploration of the novel is Celina Manzoni's article "Biografías mínimas/ínfimas y el equívoco del mal" (2002a)³⁰. Manzoni uses as a point of departure *Historia universal de la infamia* by Borges (1935). In Manzoni's view, *Historia universal de la infamia* "instala el deleitable estremecimiento, el efecto liberador e incluso de "verdad", que provoca la novedosa conjunción de lo horrible con lo bondadoso" (18). A similar "seducción por el mal" (18) can be distinguished in Bolaño's *La literatura nazi en América*. The novel, in Manzoni's words, "se propone como una forma de resistir al olvido" (18), and in particular it is a way to resist the oblivion of the irrationality, the violence and the intolerance. The inevitable repetition of these human behaviors is thematized in the novel through the "interchangeability" ("intercambiabilidad") of its characters. As Manzoni notes, "Nazi" in the novel could be read as "infamia" in Borges. In Manzoni's words:

La fascinación por lo perverso, lo bárbaro, el entusiasmo por el juego y la necesidad casi compulsiva, de poner en movimiento lo oscuro, lo tenebroso, lo escondido, lo que no tiene nombre, parece alimentar estas biografías ínfimas que pueden ingresar en la categoría de "lo

³⁰ There are two more short studies about *La literatura nazi en América*: Álvaro Bisama, "Todos somos monstruos", in *Territorios en fuga: Estudios críticos sobre la obra de Roberto Bolaño* ed. Patricia Espinosa (Santiago de Chile: FRASIS editors, 2003), 79-93. And: Ignacio Echevarría, "Historia particular de una infamia", in *Roberto Bolaño: La escritura como tauromaquia*, ed. Celina Manzoni. (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Corregidor, .2002), 37-38.

siniestro”, pese a que los infames de su galería parecen estar más cerca del grotesco que del drama. (27)

Manzoni concludes that Borges’ and Bolaño’s works, as well as many other twentieth-century literary works form a long series of texts which speculate with the “irresistible atracción que siempre ha ejercido el carácter equívoco del mal e incluso con la belleza y la verdad atribuidas a lo marginal y lo infame” (32).

In agreement with Manzoni’s idea that *La literatura nazi* is a form of resisting to the oblivion, I would like to propose Hannah Arendt’s famous theory of the banality of evil as an alternative way to describe the philosophy reverberating through *La literatura nazi*. Unlike Manzoni, who has focused on the uniqueness of evil, in *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963) Arendt argued that the great evils in history in general, and the Holocaust in particular, were not executed by fanatics or sociopaths, but rather by ordinary people who accepted the premises of their state and therefore participated believing that their actions were normal.³¹ In my view, thirty-three years later Bolaño seems to use the thesis of Arendt as the basis of his exploration of the roles writers could play in their societies.

My purpose in this chapter is to explore how the role of the writer is represented *La literatura nazi en América*. First, I will look at the textual form and I will outline the main literary devices employed. Then, I will discuss the novel on the level of content. In particular, I will explore the public discourses, works of literature and actions which

³¹Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: a Report on the Banality of Evil* (London: Faber & Faber, 1963).

Bolaño categorizes as “Nazi”. I would like to show that 1) the novel undermines the assumption of the necessarily positive role of the writer in society, and 2) the novel functions as an archive where the (often) banal evils committed by writers are recorded.

5.2 Textual form

The genre that *La literatura nazi en América* most closely resembles is the one of a literary history/dictionary. *La literatura nazi en América* is divided into fourteen chapters. Chapters 1 to 13 contain between one and four “biographical” entries about non-existing (Latin) American writers. The writers originate from all over the Americas, the majority being from Latin America. In total, there are thirty entries, and the length of each entry varies from half a page to fourteen pages. In general, the (hi)stories are told from the perspective of an omniscient narrator situated in the future. The time scope of the novel is from the 1880s to the 2020s. The dictionary is not diachronic, but rather it makes moves back and forth in time. The criteria which are used to organize the entries are diverse. Although *La literatura Nazi* presents a very fragmentary text, the diverse fragments are interrelated in various ways. Some of the characters are members of the same family, others participated in the same literary movements; in some cases, a writer who owns a publishing house issues the works of another writer featured later in the text; and in other cases, authors meet each other, or express opinions about each other. Thus, although each entry can be read separately, and it also makes sense as a single piece, the totality of “biographies” forms a big canvas where the threads of the writers’ destinies are intertwined. In any case, it depends on the reader to decide whether to treat *La literatura nazi* as thirty separate texts, or whether to try to order the pieces of the puzzle and to see the big picture.

Naturally, a literary dictionary/history is generally addressed at the academic segment of the market of symbolic goods. This is to say that literary history is a genre for a limited audience. A literary history normally serves the professionals who work in the sphere of literary studies. One may suggest that the readers who are not involved with literary studies would normally read a novel but would not engage in a comprehensive investigation of the biography of a given writer, neither would they inquire about the reception of the given work in its time of creation, or the work's relation to other works of literature or literary movements. In this sense, *La literatura nazi* can be viewed as a way to prompt the reader to reflect on the extra-literary issues related with the creation of a history of Latin American narrative.

Further, the novel could be treated as an announcement for the existence of an alternative history of Latin American literature, namely the history of Nazi literature. It is usually assumed that writers who "enter" literary history do so because of a positive contribution. In the case of *La literatura nazi*, the writers portrayed have "entered" literary history because of their infamy and disgrace.

Diverse techniques are employed in order to thematize the issue of narrating the history of (Latin) American Nazi literature. The first technique is the criteria for the organization of the "biographical entries". Some of the writers are grouped together because of family relationships (entries 1 - 3), other writers are in the same chapter because they were friends (entries 4 and 5), and some writers belong to the same chapter because their literary works belong to the same genre, for example science

fiction (entries 16 - 18). Further, as the title *La literatura nazi en América* suggests, the geographical area covered is America and indeed reader's expectation of finding entries about authors from all over the Americas is satisfied. The same does not go for expectations regarding the time frame: the historical period implied by the title is the time of the Second World War, but as I noted in the beginning of this section, the time span of the novel is 1880s till 2020s. Finally, as implied by the title, what unifies the authors presented in the novel is their relation with Nazism. However, what exactly does "Nazi literature" mean? As it becomes clear in the course of the novel, the definition of Nazi when used as a denominator of a literary work is broad and complicated. (The various reasons for which a work of literature can be regarded as Nazi will be explored in the next section.)

The second strategy Bolaño employs is to ignore a linear narrative time. The "biographical" entries are not ordered chronologically, but rather the narrative leaps back and forth in time while the novel progresses. For example, an entry about a writer born at the beginning of the twentieth century is followed by an entry about a writer born at the end of the nineteenth century. Even in some cases, the authors discussed are situated in the present or in the future. In this sense, the novel functions as an archive where diverse documents which do not form a coherent story are stored.

The third strategy to subvert the genre of a literary history is by creating a narrator which is quite uncommon for this genre. In some cases, the narrator is omniscient and reports only what is known from the "evidence" about the author being presented. This evidence, of course, are the works of literature of the character, his or her discourses

published in newspapers, the reviews written in different media about the author and so forth. In other cases, however, the narrator knows much more about the characters than a literary historian could know. For example, in several cases the narrator presents the motives of the characters for getting involved in the world of literature. In other cases, the distant and neutral voice of the narrator abruptly changes and the reader is more likely to recognize the internal monologue of the character being presented rather than a description made by a distant observer. Finally, in the last entry, the narrator becomes visible and is even identified as Roberto Bolaño.

Another note which should be made about the narrator is in relation to the tone employed in the narrative. Not only does the point of view of the narrative change within the limits of each entry, but the register of language that the narrator utilizes also alters. In some cases, the narrator uses formal and neutral language, but the register may suddenly become non-formal or even vulgar.

The final, and in my view most powerful strategy used by Bolaño is the constant reference to actual historical past, existing writers, places, literary magazines, literary critics, etc. In this sense, *La literatura nazi* does not create a self-sufficient universe, but rather it is embedded in reality. I would even say that the novel questions reality. By exploiting a real context the novel implies that the works of literature and authors presented are *possible*. For example, one of the writers portrayed in *La literatura nazi*, Ignacio Zubieta, is described as “híbrido entre Sven Hassel and José María Pemán” (41). This comparison between the character of Zubieta and the above mentioned poets may prompt the reader to inquire about Sven Hassel and José María Pemán. Such an inquiry

would show that indeed such poets existed and their biographies are marked by the controversy of their right-wing engagements.³² To sum up, the novel suggests that, although a true history of Nazi literature does not exist, such a literature has been created.

My main goal in the next section will be to look at what exactly is Nazi literature according to the novel: in the first subsection I will explore public actions and speeches of writers who are categorized as Nazi; in the second subsection, I will look at the specificity of the works of literature which go under the Nazi label; and in the third subsection I will explore the reactions of the literary field towards the Nazi actions and works of literature. Before embarking on this exploration, it is important to note that I only follow this division in subsections for the sake of clarity, and it is not the case that in the novel one could find prototypical cases. For example, there is no writer in the novel who “acts in a Nazi way” but writes as a philanthropist, nor is there any case of a writer whose novels are homophobic, but whose actions are humanitarian.

5.3. Infamous writers and...

5.3.1 Public discourse and action

Several of the writers represented in *La literatura nazi* share discriminatory and homophobic views and express them publicly (engage in hate speech). However, the Argentinian writer Silvio Savático (1901-1994) is an extreme example. As the narrator informs us:

³² For information about Hassel see the online version of the biography of the writer by Erik Haaest: <http://home.tiscali.dk/haaest/Hassel-Hazel/Texts/English/ootable.htm>.

Entre sus propuestas juveniles se cuenta la reinstauración de la Inquisición, los castigos corporales públicos, la guerra permanente ya sea contra los chilenos o contra los paraguayos o contra los bolivianos como una forma de gimnasia nacional, la poligamia masculina, el exterminio de los indios para evitar una mayor contaminación de la raza argentina, el recorte de los derechos de los ciudadanos de origen judío...(51)

The list goes on and on presenting four more similar proposals made by the Argentinian writer. Most probably, no reader would be surprised by the categorization of such statements as Nazi. However, Bolaño offers another, and at a first glance opposing, example which goes into the same category, in particular the case of Ignacio Zubieta. Ignacio Zubieta (1911- 1945) comes from a high-class family. He is described as smart, dexterous, brilliant, and talented; everybody believes that he is destined to succeed. The narrator comments that “el azar o la época terrible que le tocó (y escogió) vivir torcieron su destino irremediablemente” (37). The narrator depicts that during his travels in Europe, just before and then during the Second World War, Zubieta is a privileged witness to important political events. However, the writer sends to the press in Bogota texts about the insects in Sahara, or while in Moscow, he writes materials about the architecture and the ballet of Moscow. In no case does Zubieta take up a political position or evaluate in some way the events that he has the opportunity to witness.

A similar line of implied criticism can be distinguished when the narrator informs about the actions of the writers. In some cases, an extremist action is criticized and in other cases inaction. For example, the Brazilian writer Amado Couto (1948-1989) directly engages in criminal activities. He “works” in the Escuadrones de la Muerte. The writer

participates in sequestrations and witnesses tortures and assassinations. However, as the narrator reports, Couto keeps thinking about what Brazilian literature needs and, in his view, what is needed is vanguard art. The vanguard thinking of Couto reaches its extreme when he proposes to his bosses to sequester Rubem Fonseca and “hacerle algo”(115). In this case, when I say criminal activity, I should specify that the actions of Couto are criminal activities from the point of view of a democratic society. In Couto’s society, violence is supposedly part of the repressive apparatus of the state.³³ Thus, strictly speaking Couto’s actions are *legal*.

Another example of legal but immoral behavior is found in the case of Juan Mendiluce Thomspson (1920-1991), son of Eldemira Thomson. The Argentinian writer is indirectly accused by the narrator for his servility to different political regimes. First, the writer considers himself falangista and shares anti-North American and anti-capitalist views. Later, Juan Mendiluce converts to Peronism and occupies important governmental positions. Finally, the writer becomes a loyal supporter of the military government. None of the actions of Juan Mendiluce Thomspson is illegal; however, it can be argued that it is immoral for an individual to be a supporter of political regimes with opposing ideologies. It could be said in defense of Juan Mendiluce that it is hypothetically possible that his political views evolved, or that he was disillusioned by one political ideology and thus he became a supporter of another one.

³³ One of the most infamous examples of state violence in recent Latin American history is Operation Condor. For further information see for example: Cezar Mariano Nilson. *Operación Cóndor. Terrorismo de Estado en el cono Sur* (Buenos Aires: Lholé-Lumen,1998).

The case of Juan Mendiluce's mother, Eldemira Thompson is the opposite. Eldemira Thompson never changed her political views and this turned out to be morally wrong. Eldemira Thomspson de Mendiluce (1894-1993) originates from a high class family. To understand better the character of Thomspson de Mendiluce, it is necessary to say that she is an exceptional case of a woman writer at the beginning of the twentieth century in Argentina. Writing was generally considered to be a male occupation and only women with a very high social status could devote themselves to writing. Not only does Eldemira have the opportunity to write, but she also has the resources to found her own literary magazines and to travel to Europe whenever she desires. The most striking scene from the writer's voyages to Europe, described in the entry, is Eldemira Thomspson's meeting with Adolf Hitler in 1929. The meeting is depicted as a very sentimental, emotional and idyllic one. The writer gives some of her books as a present to Hitler, he asks her to recite some poetry, and expresses his admiration for the baby-daughter of Eldemira Thompson. After the meeting the Argentinian writer confesses that she is a convinced follower of Hitler. The impression that the reader gets from this scene is not that the writer is convinced by the worldviews of Hitler, but rather that she does not get the chance to understand his worldviews. In this sense, the reader may accept the ignorance of the writer as the reason for her fascination with Hitler.³⁴ The reader expects, though, to learn about Eldemira Thomspson's later disillusionment with the Nazi ideology and her public disengagement with it. However, the narrator does not

³⁴ As is known there were (German) intellectuals, such as Martin Heidegger, who "flirted" with the political ideas of Hitler without fully realizing the consequences of such political views. For further information see: Victor Farias, *Heidegger and Nazism*, (Philadelphia: Temple U P, 1983).

inform us of such an event. On the contrary, Eldemira Thompspon is said to found a publishing house called *The Fourth Reich*.

Eldemira Thompson's Nazi legacy is the next issue explored in the novel. When Eldemira Thompspon meets Adolf Hitler, a photograph is taken of her baby daughter Luz Mendiluce held by Hitler. The narrator reports that Luz keeps her picture with Hitler in a prominent position in her living room. The extensive description of Luz's attitude towards the photograph suggests that it has had a strong influence on the writer's life. When asked about the picture by some of her guests, Luz gives different versions. Sometimes she lies that the girl on the picture is an orphan, at other times she says that the child is a relative of Hitler, and in other cases she confesses that it is she who is on the photograph. Luz Mendiluce's attitude towards the picture can be interpreted as an attitude towards the past. One could infer that Luz is not sure how to deal with her heritage and, in particular, with her mother's flirt with Nazism. In some cases, the writer seems willing to accept her "original sin", and in others, she looks for ways to reject her relationship with her mother's legacy. In any case, the behavior of Luz Mendiluce could be interpreted as a sign of her feeling guilty about her origin. The confused relation of Luz Mendiluce to her past has an impact on the Argentinian literary field. Similar to her mother's, Luz Mendiluce's influence on the formation of the Argentinian literary scene is very big. The Mendiluce family has their own literary magazines and a publishing house. In Luz Mendiluce's lifetime the literary magazine *Letras Criollas* becomes a platform for the "nazis y los resentidos, para los alcoholizados y los marginados sexual o economicamente" (29) and Luz Mendiluce is referred to as the "mother of the new Argentinian poetry".

The next case I would like to reflect on is that of a Haitian writer who not only wants to have an impact on the literary field, but he wants even more to create his own literary field. The narrator puts it in the following way:

No es descabellado pensar que tal vez Mirebalais soñó alguna noche de inspiración y ambición con formar él sólo la poesía haitiana contemporánea. (129)

The Haitian writer Max Mirebalais (1941-1998) wants to engage with literature because, as the narrator suggests, Mirebalais wanted social prestige and literature was a convenient way to gain it. In order to become well known Mirebalais specializes in plagiarizing other authors, with whom the reading public in Haiti is not familiar. Also, he invents other writers such as the semi-German semi-Haitian Max von Hauptmann and Max Le Gueule, or as the narrator ironically puts it, “heteronyms” of Mirebalais. He writes in magazines about the works of the different poets he has invented. What is most striking in this case is the desire of Max Mirebalais to form his own literary field where he could praise his own works, which, finally, are not even his own, but are plagiarized. The desire of Mirebalais to occupy all the positions in the literary field can be interpreted as a desire to create a totalitarian literary field (a totalizing discourse) where there is no space for opposition, critique or alternative discourses. In the sub-section dedicated to the reactions of the literary field towards the actions and writings of the writers (subsection 5.3.3), I will return to the case of Mirebalais in order to show how the lack of criticism or condemnation of Mirebalais’s actions may be even worse than the writer’s behavior.

The final case that I would like to look at is the one of the founder of the Nazi organization called *La hermandad aria*. The North American Thomas R. Murchison (1940-1996) is described as a “estafador, ladrón de coches, ventajista, camello, recorrió todo el variado espectro de la delincuencia sin especializarse en ninguna disciplina específica” (147). When Thomas R. Murchison is finally imprisoned, he becomes part of the Nazi organization *La hermandad aria*. What is interesting here is that, as the narrator informs us, Murchison does not get involved with the organization because he shares its ideology, but because he needs to be part of a group if he wants to survive. If one thinks about the organization *La hermandad aria* as a prison organization, one may assume that it would most probably have no impact on society, since prison by definition is a space which is isolated and away from society. Further, the narrator reports that Murchison and three more prisoners who are part of the organization found a literary magazine. In the first issue of the magazine there are stories about the members of the brotherhood who fight against “the forces of the evil” (147). Ironically, the organization acquires a positive (or at least less negative) value when its role of a promoter of the prisoners’ engagement with literature is considered. In this sense, Thomas R. Murchison’s actions seem less immoral in comparison to the actions of Luz Mendiluce or Amado Couto, for example, whose impact on their societies is considerable.

5.3.2. Works of literature

While some of the authors can be categorized as Nazi mainly because of their actions, others fall in this category because of their literary production. Of special interest is the

case of the writers presented in the chapter *Visión, Ciencia-ficción*. The North American Zach Sodenstern (1962-2021) is described as a professional writer who has great success. He is the author of many novels and three sagas, among which the saga *El Cuarto Reich*. As the narrator informs us, Sodenstern is considered a cult writer and some of his novels are adapted for cinema. The first part of the saga *El Cuarto Reich* is distributed also in the form of an interactive text, but the narrator states/mentions that “el lector razonable apenas utilice esta variante de lectura” (106). In my view, with this sentence Bolaño makes a very slight hint about the reading public. After all, it is the reading public who is interested in the Nazi sagas. If one assumes that reading science fiction is a form of entertainment, the critique of Bolaño is directed towards people who choose reading homophobic literature as the way to entertain themselves. Maybe a reasonable reader would not do so. Also, as is well known, the genre of science fiction is by definition the genre that is furthest away from reality. This is to say that people would not normally read science fiction as a way to learn about the distant (or not so distant) historical past. In other words, in the case of science fiction the tragedy of the Second World War is used only as a material to make a novel more entertaining and the potential readers of such a book are aware of this fact. Hence, one of the most important questions which the chapter *Visión, Ciencia-ficción* raises is: is it immoral to write, publish and read science fiction sagas which exploit an actual historical phenomenon such as Nazism?

While science fiction is seen to be the genre furthest away from reality, history can be said to be the genre most closely related to it. One of the characters in the novel writes

an alternative version of *La Europa de Hitler* (1985) by Arnold J. Toynbee.³⁵ The North American Hary Sibelius (1949- 2014) writes one of the works “más complicadas, densas y posiblemente inútiles de su tiempo” (119), as the narrator explains. A “black mirror”(119) of Toynbee’s history, in the novel of Sibelius, Adolf Hitler wins the Second World War and the Nazi troops occupy the whole world. Following the work of Toynbee chapter by chapter, Sibelius creates a detailed picture of the world’s organization under the Nazi regime. If one can bring up arguments that the Nazi science fiction literature does not raise ethical problems, what about a work of literature that imitates the genre of history and distorts in an extreme way the historical facts?

The next case of literary work categorized as Nazi is somewhat the opposite of the ones presented above. The extreme case of literary escapism is the Argentinian writer Mateo Aguirre Bengoechea (1880-1940). Bengoechea, a man with diverse hobbies and interests, is an heir of a rich family and lives on an enormous farm. In the library of the writer, as the narrator reports, books on the various subjects in which the writer is interested “harmoniously exist”. During his life Bengoechea wrote four books which the narrator describes as “happy novels”. From this imagery of happiness and harmony, and also from the titles of some of the novels (such as *El alma de la cascada*), one could infer that Bengoechea had no connection with (was not very interested in) what was going on in the world. Also, the narrator describes a letter written by Bengoechea a little bit before his death, where the writer announces “un periodo brillante para la

³⁵ Here Bolaño refers to Arnold J. Toynbee, *La Europa de Hitler* (Barcelona: Editorial A H R, 1955). This is the translation in Spanish of: Arnold J. Toynbee, ed.1954. *Survey of international affairs, 1939-1946*, vol.4 of Royal institute of international affairs (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954).

humanidad” y “la triunfal entrada de una nueva edad de oro” (50). The reader could surmise that one could make such a statement in the turmoil of WW II only if one is completely unaware of what is going on, or, alternatively, if one supports the Nazi ideology.

The last case of literary production categorized as Nazi that I would like to mention is somewhat comical but at the same time it raises questions about the multiple meanings which a literary text can carry. This is the case of the Cuban writer Ernesto Pérez Masón. The “technique” which Pérez Masón employs for the purpose of conveying his extremist messages is acrostics. Among the messages which the censors encounter in the first novel of the writer are: “Viva Adolf Hitler”, “Caca para ustedes”, and “Mierda de paisito” (58). Obviously, the first message sounds absurd and out of place in the 1960s, whereas the other two messages resemble a teenage revolt against the government rather than a serious claim for a certain opposition. As a result of this “game”, the writer spends some time in prison and no publishing house wants to print his next novel because they fear the prospect of more cryptographic messages.

5.3.3. And reactions of the literary field

Another very important issue that *La literatura nazi* raises is about the literary/social environment. The novel provokes reflections about the fact that no literary text or public discourse can have any influence if the other actors in the literary field or in the social space disregard it. Among other things, a novel, a poem or a speech gains meaning if somebody reads it/listens to it. In this sense, the way in which a work of literature, public discourse or action is received functions as a regulative mechanism. If a book is

considered literature of inferior quality most probably nobody would read it. What is more, it would not matter how strong, horrible, or offensive are the claims a book makes, since they will have no effect. Whether or not a public speech will be considered inappropriate or offensive depends on the social norms in a given society. Finally, whether or not a person's actions will be deemed acceptable, immoral or criminal depends again on the concrete social norms or laws. In this sense, the novel launches a strong critique not only against writers whose actions, public discourses or works of literature are "Nazi", but also against the social environments and the literary fields where these writers are situated.

As was shown in the previous two subsections (5.3.1 and 5.3.2) in most of the cases the actions, speeches and works of literature of the Nazi writers cannot be categorized as criminal but rather as unethical. As we know in contemporary societies actions that are considered criminal are (should be) punished by the state. Also, it is well known that freedom of speech is a basic premise in a democratic society. In this sense, the questions that *La literatura Nazi* raises is how can (or should) the literary field (or social environment) react to works of literature or writers' actions that are thought to be immoral but not criminal? What are the democratic ways to react to a homophobic work of literature? Can we say whether a society is democratic by the way it reacts to homophobic discourses?

In the case of Eldemira Thompson, the literary critics react negatively both to her works and also to her public actions. Thompson publishes an autobiography entitled *Toda mi vida* at the age of 27. The narrator hardly gives any information about the contents of

this early autobiography except that it is “idílica, cuanto no plana, extenta de chismoreos y llena de descripciones paisajísticas y de consideraciones poéticas” (14). This work is said to pass unnoticed in Argentinian literary circles, but the next work of Eldemira Thompson evokes the disapproval of the literary critics. After the publication of *Horas de Europa* (1923), the most influential critic of the Argentinian literary scene calls the young writer “dama infantil y desocupada que haría mejor dedicando su esfuerzo a la beneficencia y a la educación de tanto pilleto desharrapado que corre por los espacios sin límites a la patria” (14). This implies that the literary field has a certain idea about the mission of the writer in society. The works of literature of Eldemira Thompson are not judged for their literary qualities, but rather for their functionality in the context of the Argentinian society in the first half of the twentieth century.

The case of Silvio Salvático shows another form of rejection on the part of the literary circles. As was noted in the previous section, the Argentinian writer Silvio Salvático was known for his extremely radical, discriminatory and homophobic declarations. How the declarations of the writer were received in the Argentinian society does not become apparent from the entry. If Salvático’s way of thinking found a clear expression in his works of literature does not become clear either. The narrator informs us, however, that his works were published. The scandalous fact is that the writer was even awarded with various prizes from the Argentinian municipality. This raises the question: should the writings of a person who has such views about the world be published? Can the literary production of a writer be separated from his/her personal worldviews? The narrator explains, however, that the works of Salvático were never re-published. This is to say

that he and his production sank in oblivion and this writer could have no further influence on his contemporaries.

The reaction of the literary circles and society to the case of Max Mirebalais is more alarming. As was explained in the previous subsection, the Haitian writer is described as a professional plagiarist. What is disturbing in his case is that nobody from the Haitian literary circles knew about Mirebalais's frauds. Even more disturbing is the fact that he was not only plagiarizing, but also inventing, other writers whose works were also created by plagiarism. The writer is even invited to be a cultural attaché in Germany. Later, the Haitian writer goes as far as to invent his own background. According to Mirebalais, he was a descendant of a sergeant who served in the Marine forces of General Doenitz³⁶. The sergeant purported that he was in a shipwreck on the Haitian coast and was saved by people from the Maasai tribe. According to the narrator, the story of Mirebalais "spreads like a virus" and soon many Haitians invent their own French, German, and English ancestors. The most absurd "inventions" were people's claims that they descended from the Maasai: the narrator explains that nobody on the island could be a Maasai heir. The fraud becomes even bigger when the Protestant church on the island "plagiarizes the plagiarizer" (128) and invents stories of ancestry. What is bothering in this situation is not only that society does not condemn Mirebalais' frauds, but also that many other people follow his example.

³⁶ Karl Doenitz is a German commander of U-boats. He was brought to trial at Nuremberg for war crimes. For further information see: Robert S. Wistrich, *Who's Who in Nazi Germany* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001).

Probably the most depraving reaction towards a Nazi writer can be considered the attitude towards the Chilean writer Willy Schurzholz (1956-2029). The “originality” of Schurzholz’s art is that it represents the perfect architectural plan for a concentration camp. At first his exhibition in Santiago de Chile produces a scandal, but later some Chilean businessmen, fascinated by Schurzholz’s installation, offer him to organize an exhibition in the Atacama desert. Thus, the writer comes to occupy a very central position in the Chilean cultural field. As the narrator informs, “El evento no tarda en ser la sensación del verano cultural Chileno” (98). Later, the Pinochet government offers to Schurzholz the position of cultural attaché in Angola. What strikes in the case of Willy Schurzholz is that not only the society does not condemn the writer’s artistic practice, but on the contrary, Schurzholz’s art is highly valued. Even further, the fact that the Chilean government invites Schurzholz to be a cultural attaché may be interpreted as the government’s willingness to promote abroad the “values” reverberated through Schurzholz’s art.

5.4 Conclusions

In this chapter, it has been argued that *La literatura nazi en América* functions as an archive where the infamous deeds and works of literature of different writers and also the unacceptable reactions of their literary fields (and/or societies) have been recorded. By adopting the form of an archive, the novel urges the reader to make one’s own categorizations and judgments in order to classify the information provided. In particular, the reader is prompted to reflect on diverse ethical issues such as: What types of actions can be considered “Nazi”? Is it worse to be a disengaged writer or to be a writer engaged with the wrong politics? Is the lack of action a criminal behavior in some

cases? Is it less harmful to write Nazi science fiction or Nazi novels which imitate history? Which has a bigger impact: a writer's public discourse, or his/her novel? Who is guiltier: the writer who creates homophobic works of literature or the literary field (society) that accepts such works of literature? and so forth. By showing the complexity of the issue of categorizing works of art as (im)moral, and at the same time the necessity to do so; and by pointing to the relativity of ethical norms and at the same time the need to rely on such norms, the novel urges the reader to think critically about the roles that literature plays in our societies.

Further, to link the above to the central question asked in this thesis, *La literatura nazi* could be perceived as an excellent application of Bolaño's view (discussed in *Chapter 2*) that the work of literature should not only have an aesthetical dimension, but an ethical one as well. By exploiting an actual context (i.e. making references to actual writers), *La literatura nazi* urges the reader to make an inquiry in actual historical archives in order to find out who the prototypes for the novel's characters are (or are there any prototypes at all?).

Finally, as was mentioned earlier, the novel is written in the 1990s, a period when many Latin American societies have started a process of transition to democracy. On the one hand, to reveal the homophobic, totalitarian and criminal discourses (and actions) of the past and to find a way of judging their perpetrators is certainly an important part of this process. On the other hand, given that freedom of speech is one of the basic premises of a democratic society, we could assess whether a society is democratic or not, by looking at - among other things- the way homophobic discourses fare in this society. Hence,

homophobic discourses (including works of literature) could be tolerated in a democratic society because otherwise the-freedom-of-speech condition would not be fulfilled. In my view, with *La literatura nazi* Roberto Bolaño succeeds in creating a democratic space where the infamous works of literature are allowed to exist, but at the same time they are ridiculed.

Chapter 6: *Los detectives salvajes*

6.1 Introduction

Los detectives salvajes (1998) certainly is one of the most studied works of Roberto Bolaño.³⁷ What is more interesting is that most of the studies about *Los detectives salvajes* don't provide a critical interpretation of it but treat it as a revelation. For example, Brodsky (2002), Cuadros (2005), Echevarría (2002b), and Masoliver Ródenas (2002a) recognize in the novel the history of the generation of Latin American writers (or Latin Americans) born in the 1950s. This generation is marked by a sense of frustration and disillusionment, or as Ricardo Cuadros (2005) puts it:

Los hijos latinoamericanos de los años cincuenta [...], en la mirada de Bolaño, estamos todos marcados por el sino trágico de las utopías traicionadas. Éramos demasiado pequeños cuando se estaban gestando los proyectos de transformación radical del mundo y cuando llegamos a la edad

³⁷ More studies about *Los detectives salvajes* are provided by: Brodsky (2002), De Roso (2002a), Echevarría (2002b), Martínez (2003), Masoliver Ródenas (2002a, 2002b), Pinto (2002a), Rojo (2003), Sepúlveda (2003), Villa- Matas (2002), and Villoro (2002).

de participar en el mundo descubrimos que teníamos que movernos entre escombros y cadáveres. (163)

It is remarkable that none of the above mentioned authors questions the way in which Bolaño has depicted their generation; *Los detectives salvajes* is not seen as *one of the possible ways* to tell the history of the Latin Americans born in the 1950s, but rather as *the* truthful account of this generation's history, and Roberto Bolaño as the authority to voice this history.

In general, most of the studies of *Los detectives salvajes* adopt an "universalizing" strategy – they use as a point of departure the particular story in order to decipher the universalizing claims of the novel and to place it along grand narratives such as Homer's *Odyssey*. For example, María Antonieta Flores (2002) compares *Los detectives salvajes* with Homer's *Odyssey*, and poses that Bolaño's narrative presents a degraded epics and one of its protagonist, Ulises Lima, reminds an antiheroic *Odyssey*. According to her, Bolaño succeeds in creating a grand narrative "a partir de la insignificancia de una generación cuyo rumbo está determinado por la impotencia frente a un mundo donde el sinsentido es más evidente y el poder de lo material, determinante" (96).

Considering the main question of the present thesis, my strategy is opposite to the one presented above. I will delve into the particular story in order to explore what the roles of the writer are, as suggested by the novel, and how exactly their roles are represented. To this end, I will first look at the textual form of *Los detectives salvajes* and I will outline the particular literary devices employed in order to thematize the roles of the

writer. Then, I will provide a content analysis focused on the second part of the novel. In particular, (in subsections 6.4.1, 6.4.2, and 6.4.4) I will show that the novel offers a multiplicity of contradictory ideas about the role of the writer. Also, (in section 6.4.3) I will argue that the role fulfilled by Roberto Bolaño via this novel is the one of a historian of a marginalized group of writers/poets.

6.2 Outline

Los detectives salvajes opens with the declaration of the 17 year-old Juan García Madero that he will become a poet. The initiation of García Madero in poetry happens when he meets Arturo Belano and Ulises Lima, the founders of the Real Visceralismo literary movement. The founding of Real Visceralismo takes place in early 1970s Mexico City, and the movement is named after the semi-mythical avant-guard group initiated in the 1920s by the enigmatic poet Cesárea Tinajero. This part of the novel, entitled “Mexicans lost in Mexico (1975)”, relate the first months of the participation of García Madero in the Real Visceralismo movement, a period which coincides with Arturo Belano and Ulises Lima’s preparation for the search for Cesárea Tinajero who had disappeared in the desert of Sonora. At the end of the first part of the novel Belano, Lima, García Madero and another character, Lupe, leave for the desert of Sonora.

The second part of *Los detectives salvajes*, which has the same name as the novel, encompasses the period from 1975 to the mid-1990s and it tracks Arturo Belano and Ulises Lima as they travel in Latin America, Europe, and Africa. Also, this middle section relates the stories of the other Real Visceralistas after Belano and Lima leave Mexico City. At the end of this section, Arturo Belano disappears in Africa.

The final part of the novel, entitled “The deserts of Sonora” (1976), flashes back to 1976 and it reveals details about the travel of Belano, Lima and García Madero’s search for the poet Cesárea Tinajero. Finally, the three of them find Cesárea Tinajero, but this is only to see her death. Belano and Lima disappear (again) in the desert of Sonora and the story ends with the start of the love affair of García Madero and the fourth participant in the “expedition”, the prostitute Lupe.

6.3 Textual form

The genres that *Los detectives salvajes* most closely resembles are those of diary, testimony, and detective novel. These first and the third parts have the form of the first-person diary of the young Mexican Juan García Madero who wants to be a poet. The second and longest part of the novel is entitled “Los detectives salvajes (1976- 1996)”. This part is divided into twenty-six chapters. Most of the chapters (with the exception of chapters 4, 10, 14, and 25) are additionally subdivided into two to seven entries. Each of these entries represents the testimony of a different character; in total, there are ninety-six testimonies told by fifty-three narrators.³⁸ One of the characters, Amadeo Salvatierra, appears as a narrator thirteen times while many of the characters give only one testimony. The title of each entry contains not only the name of the testimony giver and the date, but also the place where the testimony was given. For example: “Amadeo Salvatierra, calle República de Venezuela, cerca del Palacio de Inquisición, Mexico DF, enero de 1976.” In some cases, the title even contains information about what the person was doing at the moment of giving the testimony, for example, “Carlos Monsivaís,

³⁸ The number of the narrators in the whole novel reaches fifty-four when Madero is counted too.

caminando por la calle Madero, cerca de Sanborns, Mexico DF, mayo de 1976”. In general, the oldest testimonies are presented first and the narrative time gradually advances up to the 90s. There is one exception, however – the testimony of Amadeo Salvatierra relates about one night in 1976, but its thirteen parts are spread throughout the novel.

By employing and subverting elements from several textual forms such as the detective novel, testimonio and archival fiction, the textual form of *Los detectives salvajes*, and especially the second part of the novel, poses a multitude of questions to the reader about the roles of the writer.

First, the figure of the detective is marginalized to an extreme in the novel. It was discussed in *Chapter 2* of this thesis that one of the characteristic developments in contemporary Latin American detective fiction is the marginalization of the figure of the detective in terms of his knowledge and power. In the case of *Los detectives salvajes*, the figure of the detective is even further marginalized in several aspects. Actually, the reader may assume that the person who asks about Belano and Lima is a detective making an analogy with the inquiry of Bolaño and Lima who are supposedly “the savage detectives”. It is impossible to identify exactly who is making the inquiry about Lima and Belano. From most of the “testimonies”, it is clear that the testimony gives answer the questions of another person. Also, from some of the testimonies grouped in a chapter it may be inferred that the detective is “matching” the different versions about one and the same issue or event. In addition, in one case it becomes clear that Arturo Belano is the one who asks the questions (see p.383). Hence, a conclusion cannot be

reached regarding who is the inquirer. In this sense, the reader knows neither who the detective is, nor whether there is one detective or more. Also, it is not clear what the knowledge and the intentions of the detective(s) are.

Second, the figure of the detective “appears” in a narrative where he is not expected. It might be assumed that usually a detective would examine crime scenes to gain clues and evidence, obtain facts or statements from complainants, and witnesses, in order to charge suspects of a particular crime. In this sense, the detective’s figure in the novel raises interesting questions such as: what is the crime the two poets are accused of? Can literature/writing be a crime? The narrative does not provide clues about the answers to these questions, so it remains up to the reader to solve the mystery. On the other hand, Arturo Belano and Ulises Lima lead their own “investigation” – they are looking for Cesárea Tinajero, the disappeared leader of the Real Visceralismo movement. So, they are detectives themselves. In this way, the narrative poses more questions related to the figure of the detective, such as: Why the writers are detectives? What are the crimes and the mysteries that the writers-detectives try to resolve?

Further, in *Los detectives salvajes*, similarly to the contemporary detective novel, the discovery of truth is deemed impossible. As was explained in *Chapter 2*, one of the developments in contemporary Latin American detective novel is a disintegration of certainties, and the non-closure of the narrative in the sense of “solving” the mystery. In *Los detectives salvajes*, this is achieved by the introduction of many narrators. As was mentioned above, the total number of narrators is fifty-four (including the narrator of the first and the third parts - Juan García Madero). The testimony givers describe Belano and Lima in contradictory ways, thus undermining the possibility of

constructing a coherent image of the two protagonists. For example, some of the characters admire Belano and Lima, while others seem to hate them.

Another characteristic of the second part of the novel – its resemblance with testimony (or more precisely many testimonies) - raises more important questions. To start with, the “mediated” character of the narrative undermines one’s certainty about whose story is being told. The detective is positioned as a mediator between story and discourse. In this sense, the stories told are not the stories of the characters, but parts of the stories of the characters, as they are transcribed, arranged, and edited by the detective. They are arranged in such an order as to create a coherent story of Ulises Lima and Arturo Belano, who never speak for themselves. Further, the narrators are supposed to “tell the story” of Belano and Lima; however, the narrators often change the subject and start telling their own stories. So, the narratives of the testimony gives pose the question of whether they tell the life stories of Arturo Belano and Ulises Lima or the life story of their narrators. Finally, there are confusing clues about the reliability of the narrators. While sometimes the information previously given about the narrator suggests that he or she is a reliable narrator, during the testimony itself it becomes clear that the narrative cannot be the story of a sober or a mentally healthy individual. In other cases, the opposite happens. For example, many of the testimonies provided by the character Joaquín Font are given while he was in a hospital for people with mental problems. This is stated in the title of the testimony. Naturally, the reader expects the narrator to be an unreliable one. However, during the testimony, there are no clues about such a narrator. His discourse seems reasonable and coherent.

Further, the testimony- resemblance of the second part of the novel provokes the reader to associate these narratives with the actual testimonios of marginalized subjects. It was discussed in *Chapter 2* that usually the person who makes the testimony would be a marginalized subject. In the case of *Los detectives salvajes* the testimony givers are all writers (or poets, or publishers; in any case, they are people who are related somehow with the world of literature). Are they marginalized subjects? In what sense are they marginalized? I would like to suggest that the testimony-like second part of the novel functions as a hint that Belano, Lima and all the other participants in the Real Visceralismo movement are marginalized from official literary historiography. In this sense, the novel can be seen as an attempt to reinstall a marginalized literary group in the official history.

In addition, the non-fictional elements of the novel render to it yet another function – the function of (auto)biography. As was discussed in *Chapter 3* of this thesis, many of the episodes which form the “life story” of Roberto Bolaño, as presented in his official website, are fictionalized in his literary works and especially in *Los detectives salvajes*. So, on the one hand, the biography of Bolaño functions as a confirmation that these things “really happened”; and on the other hand, the novel functions as a trigger for investigations about the literary movement Infrarrealismo (Real Visceralismo in the novel). This will be discussed in detail in subsection *6.4.3 The history of Real Visceralismo: the writer as historian*.

Finally, the reader is converted to a detective in *Los detectives salvajes*. In order to “extract” the story from the multiple narratives, the reader has to decide whether he/she

can trust the narrator, constantly reorganize the information given, go forward and backward in order to look for information about the narrator who is speaking, construct separate episodes from the testimonies, and so forth. And of course, it is important to keep in mind that the stories of the protagonists Arturo Belano and Ulises Lima are never told from the first person. In my view, even the most avid reader who would put his/her greatest effort to “order” the story and to make all the pieces of the puzzle fit together would hardly succeed. There is no way of finding the key that will answer all questions that the narrative raises.

6.4 The roles of the writers represented in *Los detectives salvajes*

6.4.1 The Latin American literary field as a battleground

The image of the Latin American literary field created in the novel strongly resembles the one of a battleground. In this section, I will look at four different episodes where the imagery of a battleground is employed by the characters to describe the literary scene. These particular episodes were selected because they show the diverse levels at which “literature” and “war” could be related.

The first episode where the association between combat and literature is made is the opening scene of *Los detectives salvajes*. The young Mexican Juan García Madero participates in a literary workshop which takes places in UNAM³⁹. García Madero describes that during one of the meetings he feels as if “something has happened” in the university. Some of the hypotheses of García Madero are that there has been “a shooting” in the university, “a surprising strike”, or that somebody has “assassinated”

³⁹ Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México.

the dean of the Faculty of Humanities. Several minutes later, the protagonists of the novel, Arturo Belano and Ulises Lima enter the stage. The narrator García Madero describes the appearance of Belano and Lima in the following way:

No sé qué buscaban ellos allí. La visita parecía de naturaleza claramente beligerante, aunque no exenta de un matiz propagandístico y proselitista. Al principio los real visceralistas se mantuvieron callados o discretos. Álamo, a su vez, adoptó una postura diplomática, levemente irónica, de esperar los acontecimientos, pero poco a poco, ante la timidez de los extraños, se fue envalentonando y al cabo de media hora el taller ya era el mismo de siempre. Entonces comenzó la batalla. (15)

At this early point in the narrative, the reader could assume that the association between literary world and battleground is made only by Juan García Madero. He could be accused of “dramatizing” the events. For in the narrative of García Madero, the recurrent themes are his first experiences with love and with poetry, and the narrator sees all these experiences as very dramatic and emotionally intense. For example, on one occasion García Madero reports that “horrible things are happening” (80, 82). Later, it turns out that these “horrible things” are that the poet’s two lovers starting a quarrel in a bar and that he dreams of a woman with a cow’s head who stares at him sadly.

However, other narrators also support this imagery of literature as a battle. For example, when informed by Piel Divina that Arturo Belano and Ulises Lima “are preparing something which will change Mexican poetry”, the narrator Luis Rosado reports the following thoughts:

Por un momento, no lo niego, se me pasó por la cabeza la idea de una acción terrorista, vi a los real visceralistas preparando el secuestro de Octavio Paz. (171)

In this case, the narrator Luis Rosado introduces the idea that literature and terrorism could be connected not only metaphorically, as Garcia Madero suggests, but literally. Similarly, when Ulises Lima disappears in Nicaragua Piel Divina theorizes that the poet is fleeing from a terrorist organization that wants to kill him. According to Luis Rosado:

Piel Divina volvió a hablar de la desaparición de Ulises Lima. Su teoría era estafalaria y no resistía el más mínimo examen. Según él, Lima huía de una organización, o eso creí entender al principio, que pretendía matarlo, de ahí que al encontrarse en Managua decidiera no regresar. Se lo mirara como se lo mirara el relato era inverosímil. (349)

In this case, however, Luis Rosado rejects the idea that literature and war can be related literally by qualifying the theory of the poet Piel Divina as “implausible”. Thus, the reader gets the impression that the image of the poets Arturo Belano and Ulises Lima as terrorists, or as fleeing from terrorist organizations, is a pure fantasy, something which does not “really” happen. However, as soon as the next chapter (Chapter 16), the narrator Luis Rosado reports that Piel Divina was found killed. To put it another way, the narrative first gives clues to the reader that a connection between terrorism and literature could be made. Later, the reader gets other clues suggesting that such an idea is just an absurd fantasy. And finally, it is suggested that literature and terrorism could actually be connected, because of the case of the mysterious death of Piel Divina.

The third episode in which the imagery of literature as a battleground is developed is when Arturo Belano challenges the literary critic Iñaki Echevarne to a duel (Chapter 22). This chapter is narrated from the perspectives of three different characters: an ex-lover of Arturo Belano and the two men who participate as seconds on the duel, Guillem Piña and Jaume Plannels. As Belano's friend Guillem Piña narrates, the poet was very distressed because he thought that the literary critic Iñaki Echevarne was going to write a negative critique about his work. According to Piña, Belano thought that Echevarne was going to "defeat" him because the critic was a "shark" and recently "had fought" with another writer. Here again, the reader's attention is directed towards the image of a "battleground" as a metaphor for the world of literature. However, it turns out that Arturo Belano "really" intends to challenge Iñaki Echevarne to a duel. Both seconds, Guillem Piña and Jaume Plannels, describe the idea about the duel as ridiculous and absurd. Piña narrates that he proposed balloons filled with water and red paint instead of rifles for the duel. Plannels describes his reaction when he heard about the duel for the first time in the following way:

Una mañana me llamó mi amigo y colega Iñaki Echevarne y me dijo que necesitaba un padrino para un duelo. Yo estaba un poco resacoso, por lo que al principio no entendí lo que Iñaki me decía...Luego, cuando me lo explicó, pensé que me estaba tomando el pelo y le seguí la corriente, a mi me suelen tomar el pelo...(476)

By employing these two "cool headed" narrators, Bolaño succeeds in creating a paradox: on the one hand, the reader knows that the situation of the duel between the poet Belano and the literary critic Echevarne is absurd; also, the narrators know that the idea of a duel is absurd. On the other hand, the duel "really" happens.

The fourth case where war/battleground and literature are associated is the episode when Arturo Belano disappears in Angola (chapter 25). Unlike previous episodes discussed, this one has a very realistic setting. The narrator Jacobo Urenda is a journalist who is a French newspaper correspondent in Africa. Belano also works as a correspondent for a Spanish newspaper. Urenda and Belano first meet by chance in Luanda and then in several different places in Africa. The story takes place in the 1990s and the narrator mentions some of the deadliest conflicts in the African continent such as the genocide in Rwanda (1994) and the Civil War in Angola (1975- 2002). What is specific about Urenda's narrative is that throughout his testimony he addresses the readers (or the detectives) and he indeed only hints about the political/historical context. For example, when relating a sleepless night which Belano and Urenda spent together drinking and talking, Urenda finishes his description with the statement: "pero de esas cosas ustedes no saben nada, ustedes no han estado nunca en Africa"(527). Later in his narrative, the journalist mentions that traveling by land to Rwanda is "algo en principio casi imposible, tanto por los accidentes geográficos, como por la situación política" (530). Finally, Urenda "inquires" about the readers' knowledge about African geography and recent history:

Ustedes saben donde está Liberia? Sí, en la costa oeste de África, entre Sierra Leone y Costa de Marfil, aproximadamente, bien, ¿pero saben quién gobierna en Liberia?, ¿la derecha o la izquierda? Eso seguro que no lo saben. (531)

In this way, by being directly accused of ignorance, the reader is urged to refresh his/her knowledge (or to acquire new knowledge) about the geography and recent history of the African continent.

6.4.2. The portraits of Arturo Belano and Ulises Lima: the writer as a revolutionary

One of the ways in which *Los detectives salvajes* thematizes the role of the writer is through the images of Arturo Belano and Ulises Lima. The most characteristic feature of the images of Arturo Belano and Ulises Lima is that they are the collage of memories of the other characters; they are imaginable only through the words of other characters. Although in some cases the narrators (for example Garcia Madero) re-tell the “direct speech” of Belano or Lima, none of them ever speaks for himself. In this way, Bolaño succeeds in creating semi-existent characters: they were there, but nobody knew exactly what they were thinking; they were there, but they later disappeared and nobody knew where they went, a lot of people saw Belano and Lima, but some remembered the poets only vaguely. In this sense, Belano and Lima come to existence only when some of the other characters remembers, thinks and/or talks about them.

At first, a very positive image of the two poets is created through the narrative of Juan Garcia Madero in the first part of the novel. García Madero is a dedicated follower of Belano and Lima and he wants to be part of the Real Visceralismo movement. For Garcia Madero, Belano and Lima have the aura of heroes, of people who lead a noble struggle, of extraordinary poets. Actually, in no place in the narrative the poetry of Lima and Belano is cited. The only person who gives an opinion about its quality is García

Madero. He describes an episode when he hears a poem by Belano and then thinks that this was the best poem he had ever heard. But he never re-tells the poem.

In the second part of the novel, this image is “shattered” in many pieces. As was noted in the previous section, all testimony-givers offer contradictory information about Belano and Lima. Several “categories” of testimony givers could be distinguished: people who knew Belano and Lima closely (friends, lovers), people who did not know them very well, also people who liked them and people who disliked them. If one makes an imaginary scale where the opinions are ordered from the most negative to the most positive ones, the opinion of Alfonso Pérez Camarga would be situated in the “most negative” end of the scale. According to Camarga:

Belano y Lima no eran revolucionarios. No eran escritores. A veces escribían poesía, pero tampoco creo que fueran poetas. Eran vendedores de droga. (328)

Among the other negative opinions of Belano and Lima is the one of Lisandro Morales, the publisher who agrees to issue an anthology of Belano. In Lisandro’s words:

Estos poetas, le dije, y me quedé observando disimuladamente su reacción, son como chulos de putas desesperadas buscando a una mujer para hacer negocio con ella. (207)

In addition, the character of Carlos Monsiváis describes Belano and Lima as two obstinate, talent-less kids who do not want to recognize the importance of Octavio Paz and who are ready to negate something obvious just for the sake of negation. For

Monsiváis Belano and Lima are “dos perdidos, dos extraviados” (160). Finally, the ex-girlfriend of Belano, Laura Jáuregui, portrays the poet and Real Visceralismo in the following way:

¿No ha visto usted nunca a esos pájaros ridículos que bailan hasta la extenuación para conquistar a la hembra? Así era Arturo Belano, un pavorreal presumido y tonto. Y el realismo visceral, su agotadora danza de amor hacía mí. (169)

One could suppose that the unfavorable opinions about Belano and Lima are expressed by people who have had negative experiences with the protagonists or who are prejudiced against them for some reason. For example, many of the negative opinions are given by people who are from an “opposing literary camp”. These opinions are likely to be considered as unreliable by the reader, because he/she has been convinced by the narrative of Juan García Madero about the value of Real Visceralismo and its founders.

However, the positive views about Lima and Belano are sometimes given by narrators who could be considered unreliable as well. For example, the most positive opinion about the two poets is expressed by Joaquin Font. According to him,

...puedo decir, sin rencores de ninguna especie, que Belano era romántico, a menudo cursi, un buen amigo de sus amigos, supongo, confío, aunque nadie sabía realmente qué era lo que pensaba, probablemente ni él. Ulises Lima, por el contrario, era mucho más radical y más cordial. A veces parecía el hermano mayor de Vaché, otras un extraterrestre. (180)

Joaquin Font, the father of one of the Real Visceralistas, is a dedicated supporter of Belano and Lima, but he spends a long period in an institution for people with mental problems; therefore, his views are not completely reliable by default. Another positive opinion is given by Joaquín Vazquez Amaral. According to him, Belano was “una persona amabilísimo, muy culto nada agresivo” (204). However, as is later revealed, Amaral spent only several days in Mexico, where he met Belano and Lima. Thus, his view could be regarded as unreliable on the grounds that he did not get to know the poets well enough.

This “multiplication” of Belano and Lima is important in the sense that it provokes the reader into doubting whether or not to sympathize with the poets. Thus, the deeds of Belano and Lima are also questioned. As was noted earlier, the purpose of the literary movement Real Visceralismo is to “revolutionize” Mexican poetry. But if the personalities of Belano and Lima are suspicious, then the idea of “revolutionizing” Mexican poetry also becomes suspicious. The reader is provoked to ask questions such as: Was what Belano and Lima were doing right? Why were they “mortal enemies” with Octavio Paz? Why did only very few people like them? What is the point of “revolutionizing” poetry? Finally, what does revolutionizing poetry mean? In this way, through the characters of Belano and Lima, is introduced the idea of the social role of the writer as somebody who fights against the established cultural (and political?) order.

Finally, one of the most important strategies employed in *Los detectives salvajes* is the initiation of a play between reality and literature. As was already mentioned, Arturo Belano is seen by the critics as the “alter ego” of Roberto Bolaño. There are enough clues

in the novel so that a reader familiar with the author's biography could recognize the similitude between Belano and Bolaño. It becomes really difficult to remember what is a fact from the biography of Roberto Bolaño, and what is a "fact" from the biography of Arturo Belano. This is one of the issues which will be discussed in the next section.

6.4.3. The history of the Real Visceralismo: the writer as a historian

As was mentioned earlier, there are fifty-three narrators (fifty-four including Madero) in *Los detectives salvajes* and there are at least fifty-six characters, including Belano and Lima . More than twenty of them are related with the Real Visceralismo movement. Although through the testimonies of these narrators it is the story of Lima and Belano that is told, each of them also describes his or her own life story, and ultimately, all these stories form the history of the Real Visceralismo movement.

Since the "search" for Belano and Lima continues for more than twenty years, and some of the narrators are repeatedly asked questions about Belano and Lima, the reader learns about the destiny of the Real Visceralismo after the separation of Lima and Belano from the movement. Many of the narrators stop writing poetry. As the narrator Rafael Barrios reports in 1977:

Qué hicimos los realvisceralistas cuando se marcharon Ulises Lima y Arturo Belano: escritura automática, cadáveres exquisitos, *performances*, de una sola persona y sin espectadores, *contraintes*, escritura a dos manos, a tres manos [...] incluso sacamos una revista [...] Nos movimos...Hicimos todo lo que pudimos [...] Pero nada salió bien. (214)

Most of the Real Visceralistas withdraw from poetry sooner or later. Compared with the initial enthusiasm with which the movement is founded, what happens later on is a great disappointment. The reasons to “break up” with this literary movement or to stop writing poetry at all are different for the different characters. However, the result is the same: none of these young poets will be remembered, and none of them will “enter” literary history. In this sense, the testimonies of the narrators are the only “proof” for their existence. The reader learns about these people only because a mysterious figure is interested in the destinies of Arturo Belano and Ulises Lima and, thus, these people have the chance give their testimonies.

The testimony of Felipe Muller, presented in chapter 23, might be perceived as a summary of the history of the Real Visceralismo movement. In this chapter, Arturo Belano, cited by Felipe Muller tells the story of two writers whose destinies are exemplary for the generation of Belano:

...Sus destinos, según Arturo, esto si lo recuerdo con claridad, fueron ejemplificantes. El peruano era marxista, al menos sus lecturas discurrían por esta senda: conocía a Gramsci, a Luckacs, a Althusser. Pero también había leído a Hegel, a Kant a algunos griegos. El cubano era un narrador feliz. Esto hay que escribirlo con mayúsculas, un Narrador Feliz. No leía a teóricos sino a literatos, a poetas, a cuentistas. (497)

These two writers as “todos los escritores latinoamericanos nacidos en la década de los cincuenta”(497). believe in the revolution and in freedom. However, these poets are

destined to find out that their efforts have gone in vain and their ideals are destroyed. As Belano/Muller puts it:

...Pero entonces ocurrió lo que suele ocurrirles a los mejores escritores de Latinoamérica o a los mejores escritores nacidos en la década del cincuenta: se les reveló, como una epifanía, la trinidad formada por la juventud, el amor y la muerte. (497)

Throughout this story, a whole generation of Latin American writers is identified with the Real Visceralismo movement. Thus, the history of this movement turns out to be the history of the Latin American writers born in the 1950s of the twentieth century. This gains additional significance in light of the fact that, as was explained earlier, the Real Visceralismo movement is based on the Infrarrealismo movement which Roberto Bolaño founded in the 1970s in Mexico City and many of the characters are “based on” real life poets. I would like to discuss two things in relation to the non-fictionality of *Los detectives salvajes*: 1) its capacity to provoke the Latin American reader to identify with the history of the Real Visceralistas, and 2) its capacity to introduce change in literary history.

A confirmation of the capacity of the novel to make the Latin American reader identify with the history of the Real Visceralistas is the “confession” of the writer Roberto Brodsky (2002):

La confesión es esta: nada más abrir la primera página de *Los detectives salvajes*, supe que el poeta García Madero estaba hablando de un sentimiento conocido. En la segunda anotación de su diario, nos informa lo siguiente: “Soy huérfano, seré abogado.” A todos nos ha

pasado. Todos hemos sido huérfanos a los 17 años y pensábamos ser algo que después no fuimos. ... (82)

Further:

...De hecho, mientras avanzaba en la lectura de “Mexicanos perdidos en México”, resultó imposible evitar que mis recuerdos de joven indocumentado asomaran a la superficie y rebobinaran el tiempo, los momentos rotos y la desmesura que, para bien o para mal, los sacó de su matriz juvenil y los extravió en la adultez. (82)

It is indeed impressive that given all the fantastic elements introduced in the novel, and all of its “improbabilities”, many of the contemporaries of Bolaño, when discussing the novel showed that they identify at least to a certain extent with the characters of *Los detectives salvajes*.

The capacity of the novel to introduce change in literary history is exemplified by the case of the poet Mario Santiago Papasquiaro on whom the character of Ulises Lima is based. By revealing that Ulises Lima is “based on” his best friend Mario Santiago Papasquiaro, Bolaño directs the attention of the reading public towards the works of Mario Santiago. In 2008 *El fondo de Cultura Económica* published an anthology of the works of Papasquiaro. This publication might be at least partly a result of the popularity which Papasquiar’s works gained thanks to *Los detectives salvajes*. Further, the website <http://www.infrarrealismo.com/> existing since 2005 may be seen as an indication for the revival of the Infrarrealismo movement. The website provides information about the history of the movement, the newly integrated Infrarrealistas and the activities of the

movement in México. Again, the revitalization of the Infrarrealismo movement might be at least partly inspired by its popularization through *Los detectives salvajes*.

6.4.4. More roles of the writer: or diagnosing the Latin American literary field

More possible roles of the writer are described in chapter 23. At a first glance, almost the entire chapter is only loosely related with the other parts of the novel (except for the entry of Felipe Muller). The narrators do not seem to be interviewed by a detective, but rather they lead internal monologues. Neither of them mentions Arturo Belano, Ulises Lima or the Real Visceralistas and their discourses are concerned with their own literary careers; their own life stories and their motivations and strategies to enter (and succeed in) the world of literature are revealed. The setting for this chapter is the 1994 Madrid Book Fair where the narrators (all writers) present their works. I would like to discuss here four of these testimonies.

The first one is the case of the writer Pere Ordoñez. According to the writer:

Antaño los escritores de España (y de Hispanoamérica) entraban en el ruedo público para transgredirlo, para reformarlo, para quemarlo, para revolucionarlo. Los escritores de España (y de Hispanoamérica) procedían generalmente de familias acomodadas, familias asentadas o de una cierta posición, y al tomar ellos la pluma se volvían o se revolvían contra esa posición: escribir era renunciar, era renegar, era suicidarse. Era ir contra la familia. Hoy los escritores de España (y de Hispanoamérica) proceden en número cada vez más alarmante de familias de clase baja, del proletariado y de lumpenproletariado, y su ejercicio más usual de

la escritura es una forma de escalar posiciones en la pirámide social, una forma de asentarse cuidándose mucho de no transgredir nada. (485)

This is almost a half of the short entry by the narrator Pere Ordoñez. From the beginning to the end, he maintains a similar tone: that nowadays the writers act as “empresarios”. What is interesting about these statements is that given that nothing in the novel supports or refutes them, the reader has to turn to reality for verification in order to decide whether to take them seriously or not. This entry thus raises the questions: is it a positive thing that in the old days the writers’ role was to revolutionize “el ruedo público”? Is it a negative development that nowadays writers try to “escalar posiciones en la pirámide social”? On the other hand, this entry also raises the questions: is it true that upper-class writers are the ones who would revolutionize “el ruedo público” and the ones who come from low class families will not? Further, Pere Ordoñez speaks about the “Spanish (and Spanish American) writers” as if the social aspirations of the ones and the others were the same. And why are the “Spanish American” writers the ones in parentheses as if their group is subordinate to the one of the “Spanish writers”? Further, is what Pere Ordoñez claims true at all? Which part is true and which one is not? In short, the statement of Pere Ordoñez is charged with controversial issues relevant for Latin American literary culture.

The next statement which I would like to discuss is the entry of the successful writer Marco Antonio Palacios. In his narrative, Antonio Palacios gives young aspiring writers advice on how to succeed. In his view, for a young writer to be successful it is indispensable to become a disciple of an already established older writer. In his words:

Hay que citarlos dos o tres veces en cada conversación. ¡Hay qué citarlos sin descanso! Un consejo: no criticar nunca a los amigos del maestro. Los amigos del maestro son sagrados y una observación a destiempo puede torcer el rumbo del destino. Un consejo: es perceptivo abominar y despacharse a gusto contra los novelistas extranjeros, sobre todo si son norteamericanos, franceses o ingleses. Los escritores españoles odian a sus contemporáneos de otras lenguas y publicar una reseña negativa será siempre bien recibido. Y callar y estar al acecho. Y delimitar las áreas de trabajo. Por la mañana escribir, por la tarde corregir, por las noches leer y en las horas muertas ejercer la diplomacia, el disimulo, el encanto dúctil. (491)

The first important question raised by the statements of Marco Antonio Palacios concerns the legitimate strategies that can be applied to become a writer. The second issue is: Do people (writers) really act like this? Are writers really ready to “exercise the diplomacy” in order to succeed? Is it really necessary to be politically correct in order to be a successful writer? In this case the reader again has to “turn” to reality in order to get answers for these questions.

The third case, the one of the successful writer Hernando García Leon, is again concerned with success but in a different way. In his narrative, García Leon claims that he is not interested at all in the success of his books, but rather in being able to communicate a “special message” to his readers. In other words, Hernando García Leon perceives himself as a writer with a mission. García Leon claims that he receives “instructions from above” about what he should write and describes his prophetic dream in which he met Virgin Mary:

Y antes de quedarme mudo dije: ¿qué quieres, Señora, de este pobre servidor? Y ella dijo: Hernando, hijo mío quiero que escribas un libro. El resto de nuestra conversación el algo que no puedo contar. Pero escribí. Me puse a la faena dispuesto a dejar la piel en el empeño y al cabo de tres meses tenía trescientas cincuenta cuartillas que puse en la mesa de un editor. Su título: La nueva era y la escalera ibérica. Hoy, según me han dicho, se han vendido más de mil ejemplares. (494)

In this case, the entry of Hernando García Leon can be perceived as mockery towards the type of writer who claims the responsibility of being a “spiritual leader”, but who in fact exploits the superstitions of the audience with the aim to increase his/her sales.

The final entry that I would like to mention here is the one by Pelayo Barrendoáin, or “the crazy writer”. As Pelayo Barrendoáin claims, every writer (in the Madrid Book Fair) has his/her readers:

y en donde hasta yo, para qué seguir, para qué ir más lejos, tengo también mi cupo de lectores, los reventados, los golpeados, los que tienen en la cabeza pequeñas bombas de litio, ríos de Prozac, lagos de Epaminol, mares muertos de Rohpinol, pozos cegados de Trnaquimazín, mis hermanos, los que chupan de mi locura para alimentar su locura. (495)

One of the issues that the “crazy writer” raises here is that the uses of literature are many; and also the functions of writers are diverse. It is up to the reader to decide whether the ways in which Pere Ordoñez, Marco Antonio Palacios, Hernando García Leon, and Pelayo Barrendoáin perceive their roles deserve respect or contempt. In this “evaluation”, the reader might turn to the authority of Roberto Bolaño as a creator of the novel. The public discourses of Roberto Bolaño (which were discussed in *Chapter 4* of

this thesis) suggest that the “testimonies” of the writers in chapter 23 of *Los detectives salvajes* are a caricaturized (and fictionalized) version of Roberto Bolaño’s critique towards the literary establishment.

6.5 Conclusions

It has been demonstrated in this chapter that *Los detectives salvajes* features multi-voicedness and it provides a multiplicity of perspectives on the roles of the writer. The most important achievement of *Los detectives salvajes* in relation to the main question asked in this thesis is that it attempts to reinstall the avant-guard movement Infrarrealismo (Real Visceralismo in the novel) in Latin American literary history. In this sense, the role which Roberto Bolaño fulfills via this novel is the one of a literary historian. The textual form of *Los detectives salvajes* plays a very important role for the way in which the history of Infrarrealismo is conveyed to the reader.

Firstly, the novel adopts the form of an archive where the history of the Real Visceralismo movement is recorded. So, the reader is not directly “told” the story, but rather is urged to order and systematize the information provided in the novel. At the same time, the narrative creates very contradictory images of the protagonists Arturo Belano and Ulises Lima. Hence, it is up to the reader to decide whether he or she sympathizes with the two poets or not. In this sense, it is also up to the reader to decide whether Belano and Lima’s idea to revolutionize Mexican poetry and to establish a counterculture literary movement is worthwhile or not.

Secondly, by employing and subverting elements from the non-fictional genre of testimonio, the narrative gives enough clues to the reader familiar with the biography of Bolaño, so as to recognize in the character of Arturo Belano - Roberto Bolaño himself, in the character of Ulises Lima - the poet Mario Santiago Papasquiaro, and in Real Visceralismo – Infrarrealismo. However, the narrative does not insist on being veridical and it urges the reader to make his/her own inquiry in order to find out about the actual literary movement Infrarrealismo and the literary production of its participants.

Thirdly, by employing the figure of the writer-detective the novel posits that the the writer's mission also entails searching for and ultimately revealing (some kind of) truth. As a result, the writer seems to be entrusted with the respectable duty of denouncing social grievances. At the same time, through the literary field-as-a-battleground metaphor, it is suggested that the struggles undertaken by writers may be meaningless or absurd (as in the case of the duel between Belano and the literary critic), that these struggles may be imaginary (as in the case of García Madero), or that even when these struggles may be noble and humanitarian (as in the case of Belano in Africa), they are (by default) doomed to fail.

Finally, with this novel Roberto Bolaño both accuses writers and praises the value of literature. On the one hand, the author harshly criticizes writers' dependency on market success, their political correctness, and the disgraceful means they sometimes employ in their quest for high social status. In this sense, *Los detectives salvajes* can be perceived as the fictionalized form of the opinions expressed by Bolaño in the media (as presented in the second part of this thesis). On the other hand, with this novel Bolaño promotes

the value of literature and, more specifically, the value of poetry alluding to poetry as to the most important thing in life.

CONCLUSIONS

The main research question raised by this thesis has been: what is the role of the writer as enacted in the literary life of Roberto Bolaño and represented in his novels? In *Chapters 3 and 4* I have shown that during most of his lifetime, the writer maintained a marginal position both in society and in the literary field. Bolaño has claimed that this position is a privileged place from where he could spell out his politically-incorrect, ironic and provocative opinions which invariably desacralized the literary establishment and questioned market-oriented strategies, as well as the politically correct attitudes adopted by some Latin American writers. In this sense, he played the role of a speaker against almost every institutionalized or socially acclaimed manifestation of Latin American literary culture such as literary works awarded with literary prizes and/or writers that are part of the academia or who are supported by political regimes. It was also shown that in addition to this critical role, Bolaño acted as a fervent supporter and promoter of the social value of literature. The above statement could be put the other way around: because Bolaño believed in the social value of literature, and believed in the power of literature to introduce change in society, he found it important to criticize writers who saw literature not as an end in itself, but as a means of achieving a higher social status or as a way to propagate political views.

Further, *Chapters 5* and *6* devoted to *La literatura nazi en América* and *Los detectives salvajes*, show that both novels offer to the reader a very intense literary experience, in the sense that the reader is constantly challenged with more and more puzzles to solve. Due to their complex narrative structures, and the application and subversion of elements from diverse genres, both novels raise a multiplicity of questions about the possible roles of the writer in society and leave them open. The analysis demonstrates that both novels present a gallery of images of writers. The range of roles ascribed to writers and the diversity of their world views is impressive: from the writer-national icon, through the writer-missionary, the market-oriented writer, the strategist, the extravagant one, the avant-guard poet, the poet revolutionary, the neo-Nazi or the ivory-tower writer. Hence, my analysis suggests that one of Bolaño's priorities (or one of his roles) has been to provoke his readers to reflect on the diverse uses of literature.

Moreover, in *Chapters 5* and *6*, I argue that one of the roles fulfilled by Bolaño through his novels is the role of a literary historian. The analysis suggests that both novels provide alternative literary histories: in the case of *La literatura nazi* the reader is offered a view on the infamous deeds of fictional writers; and in the case of *Los detectives salvajes* a great importance is attributed to a marginal avant-guard literary movement, thus attempting to reinstall it in the Latin American literary canon. Both novels do not pretend to make truth claims about certain writers or works of literature, or to reveal their "true stories". Both novels only give clues to the reader that the works of literature depicted, as well as the characters of writers are not only characters of fiction. The texts raise the possibility of such characters and events existing somewhere

in reality. In this sense, Bolaño does not play the role of a literary historian who spells out ready-to-consume (hi)stories, but rather one that points to the existence of alternative discourses. Or to put it more precisely, Bolaño plays the role of a literary historian that points to the fact the telling a grand narrative about Latin American literary culture is impossible.

Finally, on the basis of the information analyzed in this thesis, it may be suggested that Bolaño succeeded in sustaining a very high level of integrity of actions, public discourses in his works of literature, a fact which adds even more value to his personal and literary accomplishments.

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