Woes of the True Global Novelist

Elena Ferrante and Roberto Bolaño in the International Literary Field

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Abstract
The *global novel* is one of the central stakes in the US-centered international literary field, a field that openly celebrates marginality, authenticity, and ethical bearing while still rewarding works targeted to an Anglophone, educated audience with an omnivorous aesthetic disposition. This essay reconstructs the genesis and the history of the contemporary literary field, tracing the geopolitical, social, and institutional changes that resulted in the current system of beliefs. The second part focuses on two celebrated global novelists, Elena Ferrante and Roberto Bolaño, studying the affinities in their work that reflect their similar position vis-à-vis the United States: they both disallow the centrality of the US and the legitimacy of academic institutions, make use of genre fiction, and craft their narratives around the figure of an authentic, marginal friend. These strategies prove to be particularly effective in responding to the contradictory constraints of the literary field.

Keywords
Ferrante – Bolaño – global novel – field theory – Pascale Casanova

The dream of the great American novel is past.
We need to write the Global novel.
Maxine Hong Kingston, 1989

1 Introduction

In the recent short book by Adam Kirsch, *The Global Novel: Writing the World in the 21st Century*, Elena Ferrante and Roberto Bolaño appear along with Pamuk, Murakami, Hamid, Adichie, Atwood, and Houellebecq, as "leading figures in the pantheon of world literature" (23-4). Kirsch writes as a popularizer rather than as a critic here: he provides a brief reading guide of the major work of each author, but he does not attempt to give a rationale for grouping these authors under a common label and doesn't mention any common trait other than the insistence on "the global dimension… of contemporary imagination" (25) and the recurring theme of violence against women (103). He does, however, take a stance on the meaning of the term *global novel* when he rejects the disparaging use of

the expression adopted by critics like Michael Lind, Tim Parks or the editors of *n+1*, for whom a text that aims at a global audience is an inherently simplistic product of multinational corporate publishing (15-18, see also Watroba for a debunking of these critiques). Kirsch's aim is to delineate an embryo canon of global novelists balanced by gender and geographical origin: implicitly, he proposes an accessible alternative to the Anglo-centered contemporary canon, which fails to represent diversity.

What Kirsch omits, however, is that this conception of *global novel* is the result of almost four decades of literary debates in the anglophone literary field, where the term started to surface during the 1980s, and soon became, to use the words of Pierre Bourdieu, one of the central stakes of the contemporary literary field: writers and critics are increasingly in competition to establish a definition of what a global novel (and a global novelist) is, and to institute a hierarchy in which this new form occupies the dominant or the dominated position. By now, writers often define themselves and their reciprocal position by accepting or rejecting or challenging the dominant definition of the global novel, and their position-taking on this issue has huge consequences on their overall trajectory. There are those, like Kazuo Ishiguro, who are eager to declare that "I am working myself up to writing a kind of epic global novel" and "a lot of people are always working themselves up to writing that kind of novel" (Bigsby 25), and those like Tim Parks who rebuff the genre altogether, denouncing it as the dull product of multinational corporate publishing (Parks 31-34). Both positions exist in the field, but only one is rewarded with the Nobel Prize.

To understand why Ferrante and Bolaño are recognized as important global novelists it is therefore necessary to understand what are the genesis, the boundaries, and the rules of the international literary field, and how these writers respond to them. In this sense, my work follows in the wake of Pascale Casanova's crucial 1999 study, *The World Republic of Letters*, which was the first consistent attempt to translate Bourdieu's notion of the literary field onto a global scale (see

Casanova xii). Bourdieu himself, in an influential lecture first delivered in 1989, had sketched a "scientific" model of the international circulation of literature and philosophy, relying on the same theoretical tools that he had used to describe the French national field (Bourdieu "Social Conditions"). Casanova's endeavor was more systematic: she put into practice what Gisèle Sapiro has often defined as a combination of Bourdieu's field theory and Immanuel Wallerstein's world-system analysis: Bourdieu's dominant-dominated opposition is mapped onto Wallerstein's geo-political relationship between the countries or cultures at the "core" of the world-system and those in the "periphery" (Sapiro "World Market" 267). On this conceptual foundation, Casanova created a new "generative" model of literary history, one that assembles "literary families" not by classifying authors by period, genre, or nationality, but by analyzing the solutions that different peripheral writers adopt to achieve literary existence. In this way, she writes, "it becomes possible to uncover unsuspected links between writers whose affinity is suggested by neither stylistic analysis nor national literary history" (177).

Ferrante and Bolaño are connected by many of these unsuspected affinities. An analysis of their works contributes in turn to reveal the implicit evaluation criteria to which they both (more or less) comply. These criteria are, expectably, organized in partial opposition to the material conditions of book circulation on a global scale: marginality, authenticity, and ethical bearing are the positive terms in the internal hierarchy of values, but an author becomes a global success when she is legitimized in the "center" (in one of the capitals of culture, and especially in New York), when she writes also for an anglophone, academic audience, and when her work can be appreciated for its form rather than its content.[1] The effective way in which *2666* and the *Neapolitan Novels* respond to these contradictory constraints helps explain their global success.

[1] Like Héctor Hoyos, I do not read these novels as examples of a preconceived theory of globality, but rather as "subject[s] of theory," articulating their own vision of the world (25). I do, however, privilege an analysis of

2 Genesis of the Field

Writing at the end of the 20th century, Casanova described Paris as the "Greenwich meridian" of the "world republic of letters," and claimed that because the French literary field had become "the most autonomous… of all," it turned out to be truly "universal" (87). The countless examples which buttress her thesis cover more than a century, but the latest ones are drawn from the 1960s and 1970s. In more recent times, she acknowledges, the authority of Paris has been challenged by an increasingly polycentric system of legitimation and by the ascendancy of the United States (168-70). This observation has been confirmed during the last two decades: even if New York is not the only center of international legitimation, it's certainly one of the most important ones, while Paris has somewhat fallen behind (see Vermeulen, who calls New York the "capital of World Literature"). The American literary field is therefore also an international one: American authors and authors from other countries seeking recognition outside their national field are competing on the same ground, and playing according to the rules of the same game. For Casanova, this is a troubling substitution: in her account, the United States gained prominence through sheer commercial force (169), and therefore, while there was some merit in Paris' dominant position, the rise of New York represents the victory of the commercial, spuriously "international" pole. I think that her anguished reaction is an understandable consequence of the transformation taking place in those same years, when the United States won their struggle against France to impose what Bourdieu calls "the dominant principle of domination" in "cultural matters" ("The Social Conditions" 227). Casanova might have regretted that the new American rules did not emphasize the opposition between small-scale and large-scale production that was essential in the French system (see Vermeulen, and

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these texts as reactions or responses to the material conditions of international book circulation, while Hoyos mostly focuses on how the novels' ideologies of the global counter other extra-literary ideologies (25-26).

Brouillette 61-75), but the new dominant principle of domination is not simply the victory of the market.

In describing the international struggle to impose "a particular definition of the legitimate exercise of intellectual activity," Bourdieu gave the example of the opposition between the German idea of *Kultur* and French *Civilisation*. From a present-day point of view, the rivalry appears to be between French universalism and American multiculturalism. Mark McGurl identifies this same polarity when he says that Casanova's World Republic of Letters has collapsed and has been replaced by the "World Pluribus of Letters," where "a writer is valued by readers in the developed world not for her transcendence of cultural particularity, but rather as a compelling aesthetic vehicle for its appreciation" (329). McGurl chooses his label wisely, evoking in the same word the imperative of diversity and the motto of the United States, and is particularly perceptive when he states that the same model of "Pluribus" works to describe the internal functioning of American literature, which since the 1960s has been the scene of "subnational cultural interventions" seeking to "liberate U.S. minority writers from the assimilative coercions of the American mainstream by symbolically affiliating them with decolonized peoples" (330-331). In drawing this connection between the internal struggle of minority writers and the principle of international legitimation, McGurl unintentionally follows Pierre Bourdieu, who claims that the struggle for the imposition of the dominant principle of domination "inevitably finds its roots in the struggles within each national camp, in struggles where the dominant national definition and foreign definition are themselves involved" ("Social Conditions" 227).

If we were to retrace the historical origin of this substitution of a Eurocentric universal aesthetics with a social understanding of literature as a multicultural object of knowledge, we could take into consideration the overall characteristics of US hegemony, which, in the account of Giovanni Arrighi, was from the start "not European-centered but world-embracing" (67), and

implied a negation of the previous European system: "global 'decolonization' and the formation of the United Nations, whose General Assembly brought together all nations on an equal footing, have been the most significant correlates of US hegemony" (67). This is not to say that a principle of geopolitical hegemony automatically becomes a principle of cultural hegemony (although UNESCO's promotion of "cultural diversity" is a quite direct institutional link). As Casanova pointed out, cultural hegemony has a much slower tempo, as cultural capital requires longer cycles of accumulation, which create a time lag between the political-economic center and the cultural one (Casanova 10-11, 14-15). In fact, the same applies to the United States, whose world hegemony underwent a deep crisis and virtually ended during the 2000s (see Arrighi 381ff.), while its power of cultural consecration continued to grow.

If these are the deep roots of the American tendency to cultural pluralism (and undoubtedly we could go further back in time), there are also more proximate causes for the way in which the paramount value of cultural diversity has shaped the contemporary literary field. One of the most evident ones is the crucial demographic change that took place in the 1960s, which Paul Jay has described it in his study of the "transnational turn" of literary studies: minority populations in the United States began to demand access to colleges and universities, and their upward mobility eventually brought them "to the front of the classroom," where they taught "formerly ignored authors and subjects, producing in turn students who have changed the very nature of academic work in the humanities and social sciences" (Jay 12). This important shift helps to explain in sheer generational terms why in the 1990s there has been an "irresistible rise" of critical discourses of multiculturalism, border studies, cosmopolitanism, transnationalism, and diaspora studies in the US academy, all of them focusing, says McGurl, on the theorization of the "conceptual pivot between internal and external difference from the nation," and all of them committed to a "spiritual and intellectual disaffiliation from what was once naïvely and unironically called 'America'" (333). Both

Jay and McGurl situate the locus of change in American universities, but because of the tight link between American literature and the academy (which is the object of McGurl's study), the transformation had an immediate effect on the literary field proper: not only have many of the immigrant and minority writers in the United States been trained in creative writing programs and have an academic affiliation, universities also provided an essential institutional support to culturally diverse writers, both indirectly by granting symbolic legitimation (critical recognition and inclusion in literature syllabi), and directly through publishing (see McGurl 331-2).

We can describe this period as one of those moments studied by Bourdieu in which an "eruption of newcomers" provokes a great upheaval: newcomers, "by the sole effect of their number and their social quality, import innovation regarding products or techniques of production, and try or claim to impose on the field of production… a new mode of evaluation of products" (*Rules* 225). In the Anglo-American world, pressure from the newcomers came both from the inside (minority writers) and from the outside (writers from former colonies of the UK and writers aiming at a world success through translation into English), in a virtuous cycle of reciprocal reinforcement. The US liberation movements of the 1960s created the ideal receptive environment for South American literature that was being aggressively marketed in the States (especially by the agent Carmen Balcells and the Barcelona-based publishing house Seix Barral); the North American audience who "viewed Hispanic cultures as sources of political energy in a generalized struggle for a just society" (Venuti 169) welcomed greedily, and encouraged in turn, the wave of translations of works by Borges, García Márquez, Cortázar, Vargas Llosa, Fuentes and other authors of the so-called "Boom." At the same time, the British publisher Heinemann successfully tapped into the audience of "third worldist" educated readers with his African Writers Series (1962-1983), which set the standard for an anti-colonial literature after the huge success of the 1962 reedition of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (Venuti 167-168).

While the political awareness of the Anglo-American world was fundamental for the recognition and canonization of these and other "postcolonial" works, the relevant position that these new authors came to occupy in the literary field was not without consequences. First, it probably encouraged American writers to "invest" in their ethnicity (or diversity otherwise defined) as a way to accumulate cultural capital, originating that peculiar aesthetic formation that McGurl dubs "high cultural pluralism" (32). Second, the consolidation of the principle of cultural pluralism in the domestic field provided in turn a sounder rationale for the international consecration of authors that embodied a similar "diversity." In his study of literary prizes, James English promptly recognizes that since the 1980s (and particularly since the 1986 victory of Wole Soyinka), the jury of the Nobel Prize for literature has adopted a conscious strategy "aimed at honoring writers of world literature who could nonetheless and simultaneously be identified with local roots, and indeed whose place within world literature was a function of their particular relationship to those local roots" (303). We could then understand the aim to create a "global" novel as the attempt to acquire that "double and redoubled advantage" of "local prestige bringing them global prestige of the sort that reaffirms and reinforces their local standing" (English 312), which has been of late the most reliable path to success.

The Nobel Prize has hardly been the only prestigious award for the growing ranks of "world literature" authors. The Neustadt International Prize for Literature, together with the Booker and the International Booker Prize, equally contribute to legitimize the growing ranks of "world literature" authors. In turn, this spike in "world-embracing" canonizations circularly reinforced the critical discourses on multiculturalism, diaspora, world literature and the like, and these discourses became one of the most effective way of accumulating symbolic capital "in the fervently globalizing U.S. academy," as they pointed scholars "toward valuable bodies of expertise they might claim as their own and offering a rationale for the inclusion of certain creative writers in an emergent canon

of world literature" (McGurl 333). It is this virtuous cycle triggered by the arrival of newcomers that explains how the global novel went from being one of the many possibilities for writers to engage with to constitute an unavoidable term of discussion and one of the central stakes of the field: the new entrants have succeeded in imposing "a new mode of evaluation of products" in the international literary field, and therefore in reorienting the production in a way that takes into account the innovation they brought. "Diversity" is now what Gisèle Sapiro calls a (or probably *the* most important) "axiological operator" in the literary field ("Globalization and Cultural Diversity" 422), and a novel can be judged for the way it accounts for non-Western regions and cultural difference, or, in other words, for how truly global it is.

3 Refracted Constraints

The values upheld in this new international field are remarkably different from the ones endorsed in the Paris-centered literary space: while before writers would proclaim the aesthetic purity of their work by rejecting any allegation of economic interest, now authors seem to have stopped paying lip service to the obligation to condemn mass media and economic success in general. In the case of postcolonial writers, Sarah Brouillette has argued convincingly that authors do not attempt to deny their inevitable association with commercial expansion and mass production, and do not define being a writer as having a "resolute autonomy from the commercial sphere" (3). This is also true for post-postcolonial authors like Bolaño and Ferrante, who never feel the need to make pronouncements against a mass readership, and depict their fictional alter egos either in the act of requesting money from their publishers or rejoicing at the good sales of their books.[2] Jorge Volpi goes as far as to claim that while the aspirations of the "Boom" writers were "prizes, international

[2] In *2666*, Archimboldi asks his editor Bubis for increasingly large advances on his novels, even when the publisher doesn't like the manuscript (826). In the *Neapolitan Novels*, the protagonist, Elena, often remarks proudly that her books are selling well (see, for example, *Those Who Leave* 79 and 272, and *Lost Child* 339).

recognition, becoming the conscience of Latin America, literary purity," the more practical ambitions of contemporary Latin American authors are "prizes, international recognition, money" (164).[3] This attitude seems to confirm the alarming predictions of those like Casanova and Bourdieu himself (in the postscript to the *Rules of Art*), who see in the absence of opposition to economic profitability a threat to the autonomy of writers and intellectuals. In what follows, I will try to see if the conditions of the contemporary literary field allow for a redefinition of autonomy that does not rely on the model of "inverted economy" but remains faithful to the main tenets of field theory, for which the degree of autonomy is the degree of mediation of external constraints.

As John B. Thompson has described in detail, the publishing world is now polarized between a small number of big conglomerates (Bertelsmann, Holtzbrinck, Lagardère, Pearson, and News Corporation), which are able to face the increasing costs brought by retail chains and literary agents, and a vast expanse of (often ephemeral) small independent publishing houses, with a shrinking number of medium-sized houses in the difficult intermediate position of having to endure the direct competition of the big ones with more modest economic means. What matters to the present analysis is that the distinction between small-scale and large-scale production still holds, but doesn't have the predictable chiastic structure of cultural and economic capital that Bourdieu has so often described (which implied that the subfield of distribution with less economic capital was also the most autonomous and vice versa): since most of the old, prestigious independents have been bought up by conglomerates, they have carried with them the cultural capital of their backlists; the editors of these imprints work to meet the profit goals imposed by the publisher, but often have a large degree of autonomy in their choices, and their target audience is explicitly "upmarket" rather than "commercial" (see Thompson 129-145). On the other hand, while small publishers continue to profess their autonomy and countercultural ambitions, they are "heavily dependent on frontlist

[3] The translation from Volpi are mine.

successes to maintain revenue and growth" and frantically look for the bestseller that will keep them afloat (Thompson 174). If in the Bourdiesian model the adherence to internal criteria of evaluation and the rejection of market constraints were nurtured by the conscious or unconscious awareness that symbolic capital would translate into economic capital in the long run (by means of the backlist), currently that passage is disrupted: it is difficult for small publishers to buy a backlist by merging with an older publisher because there are very few left, and it's nearly impossible for them to acquire the most promising authors in the field because of the high advances demanded by literary agents. Besides, when they have the good fortune of publishing authors who have an unexpected success, chances are that they will lose them to bigger houses, which can offer far more competitive advances for their next works. Or else, the publishing house itself will be bought by a larger one because of financial need.

It's not that the distinction between literary and commercial has been suppressed; on the contrary, as an editor interviewed by Gisèle Sapiro reports, "when agents sell [rights], they distinguish *fiction* and *nonfiction*. Then, in fiction, you've got *literary fiction*, *commercial fiction*, and then you have *upmarket commercial*, *very commercial*, you have *women's upmarket*, *women's commercial*, *women's upmarket literate*…" ("Globalization and Cultural Diversity" 427). However, this classification starts to look more like a way to identify a certain kind of niche audience rather than a fundamental structural opposition, as in the crowded territory of small publishers with no economic capital, little cultural capital can be accumulated either.

A bit more nuance is probably needed at this point. If we consider, as Sapiro did in her decade-long research, the way in which works in translation circulate in the international field, we find that "while English is dominant at the pole of large-scale production, diversity according to the source of language is very high at the pole of small-scale production" ("Globalization and Cultural Diversity" 436). Most literary translations are considered not profitable enough to be published by

big houses, and are published instead by non-profit presses, academic presses, and small independent trade publishers (see also Sapiro "Translation and Symbolic Capital"), which can benefit from subsides and in general from the significantly lower costs of buying rights for translation rather than English originals, while claiming at the same time the autonomy of their intellectual criteria against the rules of the market.

However, it has to be noted that the autonomous principles which these publishers declare to follow are decidedly ethical/politic rather than aesthetic: in the interviews to American editors that Sapiro records, their main intellectual concern is to save American readers from the dangers of political and cultural isolationism, and present them with "authentic voices to explain what is really going on in these countries by people who really know" ("Globalization and Cultural Diversity" 436-437). "World literature," says the head of the Virginia University Press, "it's not just literature, it's a culture, it's a history, it's a political situation that in many cases is horrendous. [...] it's important, and that's why I'm committed to it" (Sapiro "Translation and Symbolic Capital" 338). This attitude confirms that the axiological operator of diversity is well ingrained in the evaluation of works in the "upmarket" subfield, and it certainly separates it from the English-dominated commercial production. But the fact that the "genuine voice" of multiculturalism has substituted the "aesthetic purity" of universalism as the chief criterion of small-scale production has an impact on the definition of the "small-scale" itself: while a work of art was "pure" *because* it rejected the dominant taste and called for appreciation by the elected few, a voice is "genuine" because it comes from a certain place and maintains certain values, and the wider the number of readers it can reach, the better.[4] Opposition to mass market was *embedded* in the definition of aesthetic purity (in fact, as

[4] The quantitative research of Goldstone and Underwood—analyzing the frequency of clusters of terms in scholarly articles in literary studies from 1889 to 2013—seems to confirm this shift of focus from aesthetic to ethical: "As the century proceeds, that emphasis on aesthetic cultivation wanes, and appears to be replaced by a stance that one could characterize as ethical concern" (369).

Bourdieu showed, it stemmed from it), while a voice can be genuine *and* commercially successful without contradiction (even if a genuine author must not, of course, write *only* to make money).

This shift in values means that editors of big conglomerates' imprints like Knopf, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, Harcourt, Pantheon and others can claim an equal commitment to translation and to the defense of cultural diversity (as Sapiro allows, see "Globalization and Cultural Diversity" 237) without the risk of being accused of hypocrisy. On the other hand, it has become increasingly common for reviewers of successful works in translation like those of Bolaño, Ferrante, Knausgaard, or Murakami to mention positively the size of their sales: their bestseller status adds to their value, or at least does not need to be excused. The implicit discourse is no longer "despite their uncompromising aesthetic choices they were received positively by a larger audience," but "their work was so good that it managed to escape the unforgiving marginality in which literary translations are normally trapped." Fears about the homogenizing power of conglomerates have been matched, if not surpassed, by the anxiety of infinite fragmentation that a market brimming with millions of scarcely-read books provokes.

However, it would be an enormous overstatement to say that contemporary authors write only in order to make money. The goals and the values of the global novelists, as we'll see better with the analysis of Bolaño's and Ferrante's novels, still respond to criteria specific to the field. Refusing to admit that books are indeed a commodity seems at best naïve: taking a stance against money or success is beyond the point (see also Sauri). But the "inverted economy" model is not the only way the autonomy of the literary field can be conceived of. For example, in the sociology of professions, autonomy is defined as the ability to "exercise a monopoly over knowledge in [the profession's] jurisdiction and to not be subjected to outside control of content" (Sapiro "Rethinking the Concept of Autonomy" 8). Technicity, expressed in a distinct "jargon" that maintains internal homogeneity and holds back outsiders, is the source of the profession's authority, and the ethics of

autonomy and disinterestedness is not dependent upon a denial of the laws of the market. If I am looking for the best lawyer or the best doctor in town, I also expect her to charge me a higher fee than the average practitioner, but her higher economic capital reinforces rather than undermines my perception of her dominant position in her specific professional field.

The significant institutionalization of literature in the United States that McGurl describes probably plays an important role in moving the definition of autonomy towards a professional one. However, writers—especially non-American writers who participate in the international literary field—are still a vastly heterogeneous group that shares only some characteristics with organized professions, and, more importantly, "there is no relationship of necessity between professionalization and autonomy" (Sapiro "Rethinking" 38). So I will continue to follow the definition of autonomy provided by field theory: the concept, as Sapiro summarized, "relates to the process of translation of extra-literary issues according to logics specific to the field" ("Rethinking" 33). In other words, the degree of autonomy is the degree of mediation of external constraints, the way in which they are "refracted" by the rules of the field. Therefore, "the autonomization process must… always be related to the constraints at work in a given configuration" (18), and in some configurations, economic constraints may not be the most compelling ones: indeed, in the case of the *Académie des Beaux-Arts* in nineteenth-century France, the market allowed artistic activities to gain autonomy from the state, while in later periods it has been the state that has ensured them a degree of autonomy from the market (18).

With this in mind, I will now turn to the works of Elena Ferrante and Roberto Bolaño to try to understand to which constraints their writings respond most forcefully, how is this reaction is represented, fictionalized, or mystified, and what degree of autonomy they claim for themselves in the literary field.

3.1 ***Structure: Core-Periphery vs. Network***

We have seen in the first part of this essay that an intellectual disaffiliation from "Americanness" was the necessary grounding for the belief in multiculturalism that constitutes the central value of the cultural field at large. However, the United States is in fact one of the main centers where works of literature have to be legitimized in order to ascend to international relevance, and a major constraint for writers in languages other than English is the necessity of being translated and of being published by an American press. In Ferrante and Bolaño, however, this rigid core-periphery structure is denied and disproved by the very shape that the two novelists give to their books and their plots, which is to say, by the way they fictionalize the structure of the world.

In the case of Bolaño, critics have been quick to underline the centrality of displacement and fragmentation in all his works. It has been remarked that in *2666* the movement of intellectuals and artists is an inversion of usual migration patterns, going *from* Europe and North America *towards* the Mexican Santa Teresa, which is to say from the center towards the periphery (see for example Deckard 371-372). Many have maintained that the correct way to read his major novels and his short stories alike is to adopt a "network" theoretical model, which draws attention to constellations of characters, events, and places rather than insisting on the tension towards the center (see Loy). These readings underline an important point: while previous Latin American writers' "desire for the world" was universalizing and modernizing (Siskind), Bolaño deliberately exoticizes the old European center (cf. Loy 285), and insists on the centrality of peripheral areas. This aspect of Bolaño's work resonated well with the dominant critical discourses in American universities, which witnessed a further evolution from the paradigm of "world literature" to the even more pluralistic "world literatures," a strand that remedies the previous tendency to consider the local as a representative microcosm of a still centralized globe, and highlights instead features like movement, uprooting, particularity (see Müller 85), and periphery-periphery (or South-South) exchanges. The

other side of the story, which is Bolaño's significant engagement with the US literary canon, has received comparatively negligible attention: Nicholas Birns has appropriately reminded other scholars that for Bolaño every American novel, including those in Spanish, is a response either to *Moby Dick* or to *Huckleberry Finn*, and that the key role of the US/Mexican *frontera* in his novels inscribes him strategically in the more recent lineage of McCarthy and Anzaldúa, but Birns' voice has been for the most part an isolated one.

In the *Neapolitan Novels*, Elena Ferrante mystifies the centrality of the United States even more explicitly. The story of her protagonist, Elena Greco, aptly fictionalizes that very shift from universalism to multiculturalism that favored the writer's own reception. In the first two volumes of the tetralogy, Elena runs along a northbound, ascending trajectory from the periphery to the center: after excelling in primary school in a poverty-stricken peripheral neighborhood of Naples, she continues her education in the city center, bonding with classmates and professors of the educated (but still provincial) middle class; after high school, she wins a scholarship to the prestigious Scuola Normale in Pisa, where she meets her future husband, a member of one of the most prominent families in the Italian intellectual elite; at the beginning of the third volume she is in Milan, where she has a contract with a good publishing house, thanks to the support of her authoritative mother-in-law. At this point, however, her resolute rise on the social ladder is interrupted: the encounter with feminism (reinforced by its association with the point of view of Lila, her childhood friend who never left Naples) makes Elena realize that her education and her upward-directed efforts have been useless, and that she would never really belong to that upper-class, male-dominated culture that she has been striving to join. After reading a notorious pamphlet by Carla Lonzi, she recognizes in feminist thinkers the voice of Lila, and for the first time she expresses the desire to go back to Naples, and to "turn everything upside down" (*Those Who Leave* 281-3).

At the end of the third book, Elena enters the downward part of her parabola, going back to Naples with her lover after securing a divorce, and finally raising her three daughters as a single mother in a tiny apartment in the neighborhood where she was born. This descent from the center to the periphery is not, however, marked by failure (in the meantime, Elena becomes a successful writer), and is complemented by a movement of dispersion and expansion, as the protagonist starts travelling outside Italy, going to France, Germany, and finally the United States. These travels, furthermore, are all occasioned by the publication of her books in translation: she is invited abroad by small, independent publishing houses, which are always ran by women. Feminism reconnects Elena to her origins, but makes her also part of a larger horizontal network of women, which is opposed to the masculine vertical ladder. Naples, like Santa Teresa for Bolaño, becomes the key peripheral location where the contradictions of a globalized world system are unveiled, "where faith in technology, in science, in economic development, in the kindness of nature, in history that leads of necessity to improvement, in democracy, was revealed, most clearly and far in advance, to be completely without foundation" (*Lost Child* 337). Lila—the self-taught genius who never left Naples, has no secondary education but creates in Naples a perfectly efficient IBM center—is the living demonstration of the non-linearity of the world, and of the non-secondary status of the periphery.

Ferrante might be more didactic than Bolaño on this point, but the role that the periphery plays in their major works is strikingly similar. Success in the center is possible only on condition of effectively disavowing the notion of centrality, and providing instead a compelling depiction of the world as a network where peripheral cities are nodes as important as central metropolises.

3.2 *Readers: Academic vs. Authentic*

Claiming to be authentically marginal is difficult if your intended audience is explicitly Western, educated, or, even worse, academic. But since American universities, as we have seen with McGurl,

are significant actors in the legitimation (and breeding) of global novelists, having academic readers—and thus risking an academic association that would undercut the assertion of authenticity—is the unescapable constraint for every novelist seeking global recognition.

One of the most powerful ways of addressing this impasse is the one adopted by Bolaño, who humorously portrays his own audience in the first part of *2666*, the "Part About the Critics." Sarcasm about the sluggishness of scholars' opinions and their dimwitted readings is interspersed in all Bolaño's writing, and has been often noticed (see Corral). For example, in the "Part About Archimboldi" in *2666*, a casual remark in Ansky's papers notes that the blatant plagiarism of the Russian writer Efraim Ivanov went unnoticed because "literary criticism, as keen as ever, neither extrapolated nor made the connection nor noticed a thing" (711). But the comparatively more sympathetic "Part About the Critics" bears a more structural significance: the four scholars, each coming from a different Western European country like in the most classical of jokes, are the protagonists of a number of amorous and academic enterprises which are normally chronicled with the amused tones of a light comedy ("Pelletier, backed by Morini and Espinoza, went on the attack like Napoleon at Jena… Then Liz Norton appeared, heaven-sent, and demolished the counterattack like a Desaix, like a Lannes, a blond Amazon who spoke excellent German…" 12). Their efforts to meet the cult object of their study, the German writer Archimboldi, or at least to achieve a true understanding of his novels, are constantly deluded. The tension between their shallow farce and the tragic depth of Archimboldi's work is sometimes alluded to already in this first part, as when Pelletier recognizes with an ominous foreboding that Archimboldi could have never be "a part of him," no matter how brilliant and lasting his reading of his *oeuvre*:

> Archimboldi's work… seemed completely foreign, a shapeless and mysterious verbal mass, something that appeared and disappeared capriciously, literally a pretext, a false door… a hotel bathtub full of amniotic liquid in which he, Jean-Claude Pelletier, would end up committing suicide for no reason, gratuitously, in bewilderment, just because. (82-83)

Later on, it will be the impenetrability of the events in Santa Teresa by the European outsiders that will underline how Archimboldi, however close, is forever out of reach. The gap between the life of the critics and the life of the author they idolize is played out most effectively by means of deluded expectations: the "Part About Archimboldi" defies any settling resolution that the reader might have anticipated; the omniscient sacred figure of Archimboldi is revealed as a self-taught German of humble origins who is not able to speak correctly, who until the age of thirteen has read only one (stolen) book, *Animal and Plants of the European Coastal Region*, and who later on mistakes cowboy novels for a valid subject of intellectual conversation (666). His eventful life is displayed plainly, without mystery, but no secret knowledge of his writing derives from his biography. The reader who had adopted the perspective of the European scholars, and had looked for the key of Archimboldi's (and Bolaño's) greatness, is condemned to be repeatedly frustrated and even to feel guilty about her own identification with the critics. The apologue of Fürst Pückler that unexpectedly concludes the entire novel is a suitable reminder that all that posterity possesses of an author is a simulacrum, a name remembered for the wrong reasons. Bolaño, Archimboldi, and Fürst Pückler will forever escape the grip of the most resolute scholars, who—like the dull, materialist bourgeois characters of nineteenth-century literature—appear in the narration only to be dismissed as a possible audience. At the same time, Bolaño opposes to scholarly practices the model of the "true reader," whom he depicts in the act of reading compulsively, incessantly, and for no apparent reason texts of dubious importance. Archimboldi, who is obsessed with the book on marine animals and plants and, later, with Ansky's papers, is only the last avatar of this recurrent figure, which is famously embodied by Bolaño's best friend—the dead Mexican poet Mario Santiago Papasquiaro—and of course by Bolaño himself.[5]

[5] In a 1999 interview (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4opmK0SO-J8 12:30-14:42), Bolaño attributes to Mario Santiago, "lector empedernido," the habit of reading in the shower which in *Savage Detectives* characterizes his fictional alter ego Ulises Lima (*Savage Detectives* 246).

The surest way to be institutionalized as "authentic," it seems, is to attack the legitimacy of literary institutions, and make the academic reader disown her own privileged position and sympathize with a less educated but certainly more truthful readership.

3.3 *The Writer and the Missing Friend: Central Stardom vs. Marginal Anonymity*

Ferrante doesn't attack academic readers as directly as Bolaño, but she faces a similar conflict between her intended audience and the marginal group of people that she is supposed to represent: capitalizing on the tough day-to-day reality of your community of origin to gain the approval of the educated elite can be seen as an act of betrayal, and at the same time can compromise the reception of your work as authentically marginal. In a sense, the entire Neapolitan Quartet is the apologetic confession of such an act of betrayal: in a flash-forward at the beginning of the third volume, Lila expresses her discontent at the idea that Elena will exploit the existence of the people in the neighborhood to infuse life into her writing about the sick state of "the whole planet," and concludes, angrily: "write, if you want, write about Gigliola, about whoever you want. But about me no, don't you dare, promise" (*Those Who Leave* 28-29). Although Elena swears that she "won't write about anyone," in fact she does so only two years later; her book about her friendship with Lila becomes her most successful one, but it also urges Lila to disappear without a trace (a disappearance for which the *Neapolitan Novels* try paradoxically to make amends): "[the book] was very well received, and it still sells well today; teachers recommend it to students as summer reading. But I hate it" (*Lost Child* 339). Canonization in the schools and truthfulness to one's own origins are inevitably opposed in the system of values dominated by genuine diversity.

Admitting one's compromised position is only part of the solution. A way out of the deadlock for Ferrante and Bolaño is to give to their fictional alter egos an uncorrupted double, an innocent twin who is the real source of their writing and is therefore the guarantee for their purity.

This doubling is actually the main theme in Ferrante's story: not only does Elena write about Lila drawing from the notebooks that her friend entrusted to her, but we are also constantly reminded that everything that Elena thinks and does is only a pale replica of Lila's ideas and deeds (*Those Who Leave* 282-283). Elena's first novel turns out to be an unconscious remake of a story that Lila wrote when she was in primary school (*New Name* 455); above all, the *Neapolitan Novels* themselves could have been somehow written by Lila (*Lost Child* 469), and at the same time they are only a dim reflection of what the true marginal global novel—the one that Lila may have been secretly writing for years—could look like (*Lost Child* 459). The writer is pure as long as she speaks for, and even acts on behalf of, the true author, a friend that takes marginality so seriously that she disappears.

Ferrante's own anonymity echoes this narrative solution (the writer disappears but enjoys stardom at once), but in this case praise for her discretion is accompanied by the suspicion that having a pseudonym is one of the reasons of her success. As the narrator of *2666* states at the beginning, the US "likes vanished writers" (15). The elusiveness of writers like Ferrante or like Archimboldi in *2666* is a reassurance of their faithfulness to marginality once they become part of the star system of world literature. In the case of Bolaño, we can see how his attitude changes after the success of *Savage Detectives*: the figure of the writer that Archimboldi embodies is very different from the lumpen, adolescent purity of Ulises Lima and Arturo Belano. The adult, successful writer needs to reflect on his compromised position and justify it on other grounds. In the story, as soon as Archimboldi starts to publish books on a regular basis, he begins to regard his writing as both a "business" and a "game": "a game insofar as he derived pleasure from writing, a pleasure similar to that of the detective on the heels of the killer, and a business insofar as the publication of his books helped to augment, however modestly, his doorman's pay" (817).

At the same time, however, the game of writing, with its predictable commercial and non-commercial rules, is dismissed in *2666* as pointless *semblance*. In her reading of the novel, Sharae

Deckard has linked the hallucinating speech on Mexican intellectuals that Amalfitano pronounces in the first part with the analogous opinions of the old man who sells a typewriter to Archimboldi. Amalfitano, with the elaborate metaphor of a "stage" which conceals the "gigantic opening of a mine" (*2666* 121), describes the entire intellectual life as a performance whose function is to hide the abyss of reality. For the old owner of the typewriter (a former writer himself), literature is a "forest" of minor writers whose role is to conceal the few true masterpieces: "a forest that grows at a vertiginous rate, a forest no one can fence in, not even the academies, in fact, the academies make sure it flourishes unhindered, as do boosters and universities… and government institutions and patrons and cultural associations and declaimers of poetry" (787).

Although Deckard concludes that "this image encapsulates the market dynamics of the world-literary field" in which all actors are complicit, it has to be noted that 1) Bolaño's critique is addressed to the institutional aspect of writing more than to the market *per se*, and 2) that a counterpart to *semblance* is presented in the novel, and constitutes the hidden core of Archimboldi's writing: as Archimboldi ruminates when he is alone in Kostekino, "only Ansky's wandering isn't semblance, he thought, only Ansky at fourteen isn't semblance. Ansky lived his all life in rabid immaturity because the revolution, the one true revolution, is also immature" (741). Ansky, the adolescent writer who, like the poets in *Savage Detectives*, believes in the revolution, is the author of a true masterpiece—the notebooks that Archimboldi finds in Kostekino—which "dictates" Archimboldi's own writing. When the old owner of the typewriter says that minor works are "the shell of literature. A semblance" and that "the person who really writes the minor work is a secret writer who accepts only the dictates of a masterpiece," Archimboldi thinks of Ansky (786).

The key to Archimboldi's greatness is that he is acting on behalf of the missing writer of a masterpiece, a dynamic that resembles that of Elena and Lila in the *Neapolitan Novels*. Outside the realm of fiction, Bolaño's frequent mentions of the true poet Mario Santiago during interviews

probably serve the same function: successful writers can't deny their involvement in the institutional and commercial game of literature, but they can claim for themselves a sort of derivative purity, the purity of the missing friend of whom they are the spokespersons.

3.4 *Genre: Form vs. Content*

Another aspect of the need to exhibit "marginal authenticity" is the requirement to be ethically and/or politically relevant: as we have seen in the interviews with American editors, genuine voices from abroad bear the responsibility of making the American public aware of the problems that different minorities have to endure. The way Ferrante claims for herself a minority status is to link her lowbrow and peripheral origins with a renewed interest in feminism. A woman author proud of her identity does not model her work on masculine paradigms, but recuperates lowbrow romance in a feminist key. Peripherality is associated with genre fiction, while high literature is tainted with the allegiance to patriarchy. In her collection of non-fictional pieces, Ferrante confesses that she finds particularly appealing those "low levels of storytelling" that for years she "repressed in the name of Literature": "trash about love and betrayal, which has produced in me… a desire for not necessarily logical plots, a taste for strong, slightly vulgar passions" (*Frantumaglia*). This commitment to strong passions and an engrossing plot is displayed in the Neapolitan Quartet without irony or attempts at double coding. On the contrary, Ferrante's loyalty to lowbrow tastes is not only a matter of style (loaded with superlatives and cliffhangers), but is also embedded in the *Künstlerroman* of Elena, who writes her first book when she realizes that because of her lack of cultural capital she would never become an academic like her husband (*New Name* 431-3).

The very quality of the book we are reading is repeatedly called into question in the story: the characters who belong to the educated upper class often criticize the books written by the protagonist: for the engaged intellectual Franco Mari, the first novel is just a story of "petty love

affairs and… desire for social ascent" (*Those Who Leave* 80), while for Elena's mother-in-law, her second book, which the publisher had enthusiastically defined "pure pleasure of narration" (*Lost Child* 258), is worthless. More puzzlingly, those same novels are repudiated by Lila, but for opposite reasons: while Franco Mari praises the ability of the protagonist "to put together the fragments of things in her own way" (*Those Who Leave* 79), Lila regards meaningful coherence as a distortion of reality (*Lost Child* 431), and accuses Elena of betraying her authentic self in her writing: "You mustn't write those things, Lenù, you aren't that, none of what I read resembles you, it's an ugly, ugly book, and the one before it was, too" (*Those Who Leave* 272). Ferrante is staging here the difficulty of finding a compromise between literariness and authenticity. A bad solution is the one adopted by Elena in the story: counterfeit literariness of language and form covers a trivial and predictable plot; a good solution—Ferrante seems to suggest—are the *Neapolitan Novels*: the author avoids retaining the pretentious surface of highbrow literature and stays true to her popular origins, but at the same time she claims for her fiction the status of authentic literature by defying the expectations created by the genre format (in the end, nothing comes to a solution, and the reappearance of the dolls undermines the logic of the entire plot), and above all by engaging with ethically "important" content (the condition of women, violence, the end of the idea of progress, the fate of the periphery). Ferrante, in other words, takes seriously the insistence on ethics rather than aesthetics that characterizes recent criticism, and turns to genre to emphasize the importance of content to the prejudice of form.

This strategy, however, is probably not the most rewarding one. While Ferrante has enjoyed considerable critical acclaim, her writing has also been subjected to disparaging comments, and her good standing in the new canon of world literature is often a subject of polemical debates. The different and much more successful way in which Bolaño deals with genre will clarify some of the reasons of the disparity in cultural capital associated with the two authors.

Bolaño's engagement with science fiction and detective stories has been often pointed out, and his "fusion of high art with the formats of mass culture" has been seen as a "central modification that Bolaño carried out with respect to the Boom" (Gutiérrez-Mouat 15). In other words, Bolaño conceives genre as a means to be in dialogue with the high tradition of Latin American literature, a way to establish his own position in the canon rather than to delegitimize it (see Gutiérrez-Mouat 10, 50, 91-92). Arturo Belano in *Savage Detectives* is portrayed reading "a book on the Templars, the mystery of the Gothic cathedrals, that kind of thing" (168), Archimboldi loves cowboy novels in *2666* (661), and Ansky is a passionate reader of the trite science fiction books of Efraim Ivanov (710), but they also read non-canonical works of high literature and avant-garde poetry, which are proof of their distinguished taste. Bolaño turns his own position of self-taught writer of wide-ranging readings to his own advantage, transforming it into the condition of truly great writing: high and low, horror and bliss, everything must be in everything in order to achieve "the end of semblance," like Arcimboldo's paintings and Ansky's writings do (*2666* 734).

This stance is endowed with the highest recognition in a field that has its center in the United States, where "omnivorousness" has become the dominant cultural value. It is particularly significant that the most important endorsement for Bolaño's *By Night in Chile* (the first of his novels to be published in the US) came from Susan Sontag, who with essays like "Against Interpretation" and "Notes on Camp" marked the rupture of the rigid boundaries between high-, middle-, and low-brow culture.[6] Being omnivorous—that is to say, being able to equally appreciate fine art and popular culture—is now the distinguishing characteristic of the dominant fraction of the cultural field, which is a direct consequence of the fact that "the ethnocentrism central to snobbish elitism is replaced by cultural relativism" (Peterson and Kern, quoted in Lizardo and Skiles 92). In other

[6] In her interview with Willing Davidson, New Directions' director Barbara Epler speaks to the fundamental role of Sontag, Francisco Goldman, and herself in determining the success of Bolaño in the United States (Davidson).

words, the demographic and geopolitical changes that I outlined in the first part of this essay have created the conditions by which a writer or a critic who exhibits familiarity with previously marginal cultural products gains recognition and approval. A widespread, recent consequence has been the so-called "genre turn," which is the "boom in literary fiction that incorporates various kinds of genre fiction" (see Rosen). However, as Rosen notes, these texts end up reinforcing a distinction between innovative and derivative "by highlighting the ways they bend the genres they adopt into new and varied shapes that could not be mistaken for the cookie-cutter products of industry." Omnivorousness relies, in fact, on the ability to separate "form from content" which is "at the basis of the set of class-distributed cognitive schemes that have become valuable for providing cultural capital" (Lizardo and Skiles 100); in other words, omnivorousness is the ability to have an aesthetic appreciation of the wider variety of content that a multicultural society imposes.

Bolaño, like the writers considered by Rosen, distinguishes within *2666* the stereotypical science fiction novels of Efraim Ivanov from Ansky's original and brilliant use of the genre, a distinction that is reflected on the relationship between Bolaño's innovative fiction and his declared lowbrow sources. Besides, the format of the detective story in the "Part About the Crimes" is evoked only to show its inadequacy in accounting for the complexity of reality, where evil is not the result of the actions of an identifiable group of people, but is rather the consequence of systemic factors whose culprits are difficult to pin down. Genre, in other words, is brought into play to reinforce the value of realistic literature and of original innovation of a literary tradition.

Ferrante, in spite of some similarities (in the *Neapolitan Novels*, too, romance fails to explain and contain reality), adopts a weaker approach to genre, insisting on the ethical relevance of the content and the pleasure that the reader draws from the story, and claiming that the aesthetic appreciation of the form was the prerogative of a now delegitimized cultural elite. This is in direct conflict with the dominant position of omnivorousness, which maintains the existence of an

aesthetic disposition (the ability to judge form, no matter the content), while denying the fact that this competence has an uneven social distribution, and is therefore a subtler mark for cultural distinction. Ferrante, whose protagonist doesn't show significant appreciation of high literature outside the scholastic taste for classics in Latin, occupies in the subfield of literary production a dominated position, and for this reason she normally wins the support of women scholars or young critics who are in a similar dominated position within the academy. These critics, in their turn, often strive to underline those formal aspects of Ferrante's work that seem more adequate to academic discussion (see, for example, the essays collected in Russo Bullaro and Love). These scholars attempt, in other words, to demonstrate the richness and formal complexity of a text whose face value is to be a page turner with relatable female characters and an important message to convey. If they succeed, Elena Ferrante will be consecrated, like Roberto Bolaño before her, as an authentically marginal and ethically committed global novelist who is read and aesthetically appreciated by the educated readers of the center. The process of canon formation is still ongoing.

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