



Writing from the Periphery: The Local and Global in *Fictions* by Jorge Luis

Borges and *Distant Star* by Roberto Bolaño.

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Immanuel Wallerstein defines the world as a network of 'core', 'periphery' and 'semi-periphery' economic states.¹ Within this framework, South America is a continent of peripheral states. Franco Moretti proposes that this world-system is analogous to the spread of culture and that a peripheral culture is perpetually 'intersected and altered' by a core culture.² Therefore, to participate in the world-system, peripheral cultures must submit to rules radiating from the core. However, this relationship is not always submissive. Mariano Siskind suggests that a repeated notion in Latin American literature is a '*deseo de mundo*, desire for the world'.³ Essentially, Latin American literature actively aspires toward the Western hegemonic core. *Fictions* by Jorge Luis Borges and *Distant Star* by Roberto Bolaño certainly demonstrate desire for cosmopolitanism due to their engagement with Western culture, despite originating from Argentina and Chile respectively.⁴ However, categorising them as the embodiment of Siskind's *deseo de mundo* would be a disservice to the national elements in the texts. Through the exploration of genre, philosophy, and translation it is clear to see that the relationship between local and global elements within *Fictions* and *Distant Star* is more complex than simply aligning them to one side of the Atlantic.

Firstly, Borges's peripherality reflects its time as he oscillates between tradition and the emerging modernity of Argentina. However, as Adam Sharman suggests, modernity invokes 'the development of a world-system whose centre was Europe' reminding us that local elements are associated with tradition and modernity with

¹ Immanuel Wallerstein, *World-Systems Analysis: An Introduction* (Duke University Press, 2004). p.28

² Franco Moretti, "Conjectures on World Literature", *New Left Review*, 1.1 (2000), p.56

³ Mariano Siskind, *Cosmopolitan Desires: Global Modernity and World Literature in Latin America* (Northwestern University Press, 2014). p.3

⁴ Roberto Bolaño, *Distant Star* (London: Random House, 2020) and Jorge Luis Borges, *Fictions* (London: Penguin Classics, 2000).

globalisation.⁵ One way in which Borges interacts with global modernisation is through his reinvention of genre. *Fictions* by Borges is an innovative collection of stories that William Boyd labels 'cryptic/ludic', separating them from previous styles.⁶ The short story is rooted in the oral storytelling tradition but it could parallel Moretti's argument about the spread of the novel because publication of short story collections began due to 'mass middle-class literacy of the 19th century' in Europe, similar to how the novel is embedded within Western economies.⁷ This suggests that the short story has evolved into a formalised Western genre. Moretti contends that compromise, due to 'the encounter of western form and [local] reality', is fundamental to world literature.⁸ Compromise in the face of western influence can be seen in the choice of 'ficciones' as the title of Borges's short story collection. 'Ficciones' is a cognate of the English 'fictions' even though 'cuento, novela, narrativa' were more common in Spanish.⁹ However, the title alludes to the artifice of writing and stresses that, despite the collection's fluctuations between fiction and non-fiction, it remains within the realm of the fantastical. Therefore, by creating a new style, Borges resists the formal constrictions pushed by the Western literary core. Efraín Kristal suggests that Moretti's argument is inadequate when considering Spanish American literary power. Kristal cites Borges's 'unprecedented fusion' of genres as influential on both fiction from the continent and abroad within his defence of Spanish American literature as a dominant force against the hegemony of Western literature.¹⁰ Therefore, Borges's innovation suggests a tension between the rejection of global modernity and an active interaction with the production of world literature.

⁵ Adam Sharman, *Tradition and Modernity in Spanish American Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007). p.5

⁶ William Boyd, "Brief Encounters", *The Guardian*, 2004
<<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2004/oct/02/featuresreviews.guardianreview38>> [Accessed 21 December 2020].

⁷ William Boyd, "A Short History of The Short Story", *Prospect Magazine*, 2006
<<https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/magazine/william-boyd-short-history-of-the-short-story>> [Accessed 21 December 2020].

⁸ Moretti, p.58

⁹ Daniel Balderston, "Fictions", in *The Cambridge Companion to Jorge Luis Borges* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013) p.110

¹⁰ Efraín Kristal, "Considering Coldly...", *New Left Review*, 15 (2002) p.70

Conversely, while *Distant Star* is a novel and thus adheres to Moretti's argument, the theme of poetry is central to the novel's evocation of local identity. Critiquing Moretti's preoccupation with the novel, Kristal cites poetry as 'the dominant literary genre' in Spanish America which negates the hegemony of Western novels.¹¹ *Distant Star* centres on the lives of poets and famous Chilean poets like Octavio Paz and Pablo Neruda are constantly mentioned. The centrality of poetry to Chilean culture can be seen in the description of Patricia Méndez, one of Carlos Weider's victims, 'a devout follower of Pablo Neruda' and 'under the spell of Neruda'.¹² The word 'devout' suggests religious fervour, framing Neruda as Christ-like, while 'spell' implies his otherworldliness. However, Neruda is identified as a celebrity by the juxtaposition of these descriptors against frequent references to anglophone popular culture such as Pink Floyd. The foregrounding of poetry and the comparison between poets and western celebrities allows a global audience to understand the importance of local identity to Chilean poetry.

Another celebrity poet in *Distant Star* is Carlos Weider, the serial killer first introduced as Alberto Ruiz-Tagle. With his 'positively friendly' personality, he easily befriends and seduces female poets and Patricia Méndez is under Weider's spell just as much as Neruda's.¹³ However, his characterisation enters a magical status, contrasting against the modest Chilean setting and evoking the Latin American genre of magical realism since, as Angel Flores suggests, the main characteristic of the genre is that extraordinary elements are grounded by reality in order to 'prevent their myth from flying off'.¹⁴ The narrator's reliance on infrequent encounters with Weider alongside second-hand sources cloaks Weider in secrecy, cultivating a mythical figure. Even Weider's first 'poetic act' seems fantastic because of the unreliability of its narration.¹⁵ The 'twilight' setting obscures Weider and the line 'as if the whole thing were simply a mirage or a nightmare' highlights the situation's unreality.¹⁶ Firstly, a 'mirage' suggests

¹¹ Kristal, p.62

¹² Bolaño, *Distant Star*, p.35-36

¹³ Bolaño, p.6-5

¹⁴ Angel Flores, "Magical Realism in Spanish American Fiction", in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community* (Duke University Press, 2003) p.115-116

¹⁵ Bolaño, p.26

¹⁶ Bolaño, p.26-27

illusion and the grammatical structure of this sentence triggers the subjunctive mood. The subjunctive mood is integral to the Spanish language where it is frequently used to express uncertainty, furthering Weider's unreality on a grammatical level using a particularly Spanish form. The translation uses the verb 'were', one of the few examples of the subjunctive in English. However, while Weider is a magical 'mirage', he is also a 'nightmare', symbolic of the horrors of the Pinochet regime. Jean Franco proposes that 'magic' was used to explore 'the political unconscious of authoritarianism'¹⁷ suggesting that Latin American magical realism is particularly post-colonial and peripheral. Not only was it formed at the boundaries of the hegemonic core, but it was also infused with the context of authoritarian dictatorships that dominated the continent. Following this definition of magical realism, Bolaño conforms to his local literary heritage.

However, while Bolaño was influenced by his magical realist predecessors, to label him a 'magical realist' would be inaccurate. Sharae Deckard maintains that Bolaño criticised the 'universalized cosmopolitanism' of magical realism and suggests his work is an example of 'peripheral realism' meaning Bolaño's style is predominantly realist but 'intermingled with the unreal'.¹⁸ Weider's otherworldliness deteriorates when the narrator locates him in Europe. The pursuit ends anticlimactically with neither the narrator nor the reader witnessing Weider's comeuppance, despite the narrator's obsessive detective work. Here realism eclipses the magical. The setting's shift to Europe could imply a manifestation of Siskind's *deseo de mundo*. However, the anticlimactic nature of the ending is embedded in Europe as the narrator focuses on the monotony of travelling from 'Lloret back to Blanes and then the train to Barcelona'.¹⁹ In this light, the modern cosmopolitan world is dull. Therefore, Bolaño moves away from both magical realism and global cosmopolitanism, writing with a uniquely peripheral style, neither local nor global.

¹⁷ Jean Franco, *An Introduction to Spanish-American Literature* (Cambridge: University Press, 2000), p.318

¹⁸ Sharae Deckard, "Peripheral Realism, Millennial Capitalism, And Roberto Bolaño's 2666", *Modern Language Quarterly*, 73.3 (2012), p.351-353

¹⁹ Bolaño, p.162

While Borges has been identified as a major 'pathfinder' of magical realism, ultimately, his work defies simplistic categorisation.²⁰ Beatriz Sarlo describes him as a writer on the edge (*en las orillas*) which captures his fusion of high and low culture, and the local and the global.²¹ For example, Borges frequently places the popular detective genre alongside philosophical conceits. Phillip Swanson proposes that Borges's 'cerebral reinvention' of the detective genre is what foreign readers associate with Borges and, considering the shift to a detective style in the climax of *Distant Star*, has influenced writers such as Bolaño. 'Death and the Compass' is a direct homage to Poe's 'The Purloined Letter' however Borges twists the genre into parody and fable. Clues are provided in the style of a detailed police record 'On the fourth, at 11:30am a writer for the Yiddische Zeitung telephoned Yarmolinsky', which contrasts against Lönnrot's farcical characterisation.²² After noting the facts of the rabbi's death, Lönnrot says, 'I would prefer a rabbinical explanation, not the imaginary bunglings of an imaginary burglar'.²³ The repetition of 'imaginary' and the 'bu' sound in both 'bunglings' and 'burglar' promises poetry, suggesting Lönnrot's intelligence, but this is undercut by the plosive 'b's and nasality in 'bungling' which sounds as clumsy as its meaning, ultimately framing Lönnrot as pretentious. Lönnrot's desire for a riddle blinds him to obvious clues, portraying him as an extreme example of the Western philosophy of rationalism, where reason conquers over evidence. By invoking and parodying both the detective genre and a strain of Western philosophy, we are reminded of Borges's peripherality. Borges explores Western concepts but, through parody, also distances himself.

In 'Funes, His Memory', Borges furthers his amalgamation of local and global elements by intertwining Western philosophy with local identity. In this cautionary tale of Locke's empiricism taken to extreme, Funes gains superhuman memory. However, this gift is also a curse as it leaves him with no grasp of the bigger picture. In the Spanish,

²⁰ Flores, p.113

²¹ Beatriz Sarlo, "Borges Center - Beatriz Sarlo: Borges A Writer On The Edge - The University Of Pittsburgh", *Borges.Pitt.Edu*, 2006 <<http://www.borges.pitt.edu/bsol/bsii.php>> [Accessed 21 December 2020].

²² Borges, p.112

²³ Borges, p.112

Funes can perceive 'todos los vástagos y racimos y frutos'.²⁴ Here, his ability is described with poetic reverence due to the intense assonance of the 'os' sound combined with the polysyndeton of the repeated 'y'. Borges's manipulation of language reflects the magnificence of Funes' power and recalls Kristal's argument of the hegemony of poetry in Spanish American literature. The 'compadrito' Funes is described as a 'vernacular Zarathustra', a reference to *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in which Nietzsche explores the concept of 'Übermensch' or superman.²⁵ By uniting Uruguayan experience with Western philosophy, Borges avoids a simplistic definition of national identity. While 'nationalism lies at the heart' of his work, Borges's nationalism does not include forced 'color local'.²⁶ In his essay 'El escritor argentino y la tradición', Borges suggests that in the Qur'an, there are no camels.²⁷ He argues that if an outsider were to write about Arab culture, camels would repeatedly appear as a cultural symbol. However, for the prophet Mohammed, there is no need to include them as they are daily reality. Borges's definition of Argentinian culture is Western culture, not images of *gauchos* and *las pampas*.²⁸ In 'Funes', Borges proposes that *Cono Sur* identity is complex. Sharman suggests that 'Funes is not simply Uruguayan; he is complexly so. He is neither Nietzsche nor Locke nor Pliny; he is all those things and more (and less): he's Funes'.²⁹ This exemplifies Borges's relationship between local and global elements because as Suzanne Jill Levine suggests, he creates a new 'literary continent between North and South America, between America and Europe'.³⁰ He does not simply express *color local* or *deseo de mundo* in his work but both and neither.

Like Borges, Bolaño embeds Western concepts into *Cono Sur* settings. He uses religious imagery to connect local and global elements and emphasise Weider's godlike

²⁴ Jorge Luis Borges, *Ficciones* (Madrid: Alianza, 1991) p.70

²⁵ Borges, *Fictions*, p.91 and Friedrich Nietzsche and Walter Kaufmann, *The Portable Nietzsche* (London: Penguin Books, 1988), p.91

²⁶ Sharman, p.127

²⁷ Jorge Luis Borges, 'El escritor argentino y la tradición'. Vol. 232. *Sur*, 1955. p.3

²⁸ Borges, 'El escritor', p.5

²⁹ Sharman, p.129

³⁰ Jane Ciabattari, "Is Borges The 20th Century's Most Important Writer?", *BBC*, 2014

<<https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20140902-the-20th-century-s-best-writer>> [Accessed 21 December 2020].

influence. During his first performance, Weider writes the book of Genesis in Latin among the clouds, close to heaven. Only 'Mad Norberto' can translate the Latin, implying that his madness or *theia mania* is a gift from God and allows closer interaction with Him. Simultaneously, Norberto's slang in the original Spanish, '¿cachai?' meaning 'y'know?' cements his Chilean identity, furthering the union between the local and religion.³¹ Like Borges, Bolaño inscribes Nietzschean philosophy into local settings. Weider is also an *Übermensch*, a creator of his own morals and completely self-driven. As a pilot, Weider is a physical manifestation of the quote 'the higher you ascend, the smaller you appear to the eye of envy', reminding us of the narrator's envy of Alberto Ruiz-Tagle.³² Also, the *Übermensch* was co-opted by Nazis to bolster theories of racial superiority and nationalism. This is supported textually by Weider's fervent nationalism and Norberto's exclamations that 'The Second World War is returning'.³³ Weider's skywriting also invokes the 'aeropoesia' of Futurism which was closely tied with Italian fascism.³⁴ Therefore, through comparison to an *Übermensch*, Weider is globally recognisable as a figure of evil and the religious imagery signifies his power. However, Weider also works for the Pinochet government. By mapping familiar concepts of world history and philosophy onto the unfamiliar setting of Chile, Bolaño conveys his hostility toward Pinochet's regime and ensures global understanding.

A discussion of Bolaño and Borges would be incomplete without mentioning Pierre Ménard. While they share a preoccupation with Nietzsche, the detective genre and magical realism, the clearest link between *Fictions* and *Distant Star* is the reference to the 'ghost of Pierre Ménard' in *Distant Star's* introduction.³⁵ Borges's short story 'Pierre Ménard, author of Don Quixote' parodies literary criticism and explores a perspectivist view of history. The narrator explains that Ménard's aim is to recreate Don Quixote from Cervantes' 17th century perspective. Ménard's version is identical to Cervantes' but his

³¹ Roberto Bolaño, *Estrella Distante* (Barcelona: Anagrama, 2009) p.22

³² Nietzsche and Kaufmann, p.176

³³ Bolaño, p.26

³⁴ Willard Bohn, "The Poetics of Flight: Futurist "Aeropoesia"", *MLN*, 121.1 (2006), p.207

³⁵ Bolaño, p.2

20th century perspective infuses the words with new meanings. Balderston suggests that Ménard's 'total identification' with Cervantes 'heightens the distance' between them and therefore also 'between any reader and any author' since each new reading or re-reading enriches a text with more meaning.³⁶ Therefore, Borges mocks the dream of complete understanding of the original author's context and meaning. The reference to Ménard in *Distant Star* furthers Bolaño's underlying conceit that he has reproduced fictional Arturo B's narrative. From Arturo's perspective, the story is a historical account of events but in the hands of Bolaño, like Ménard's version of Quixote, the words have a different meaning. In Arturo's version, Weider is a real person who he has interacted with but in Bolaño's novel, Weider is more intangible and unreal.

The ghost of Ménard can also be sensed in the translation of the texts into English, the ultimate jump from local to global. As Jonathan Arac states, due its lingua franca status, English 'serves as the medium through which knowledge may be translated from the local to the global.'³⁷ However, as is clear with Ménard, each translation infuses the text with a different meaning. In this case, translation into English alters Borges and Bolaño's relationship to local elements. In Andrew Hurley's translation of *Fictions*, he includes a translation note to 'supply information that a Latin American... reader would have' and would 'colour' their reading, highlighting the limits of translation to explain local elements.³⁸ In Chris Andrew's translation of *Distant Star* there is no translation note. Instead, specifically Chilean references are sacrificed in the name of globality. For example, 'pan amasado' (Chilean country bread) becomes 'freshly-baked bread'.³⁹ It could be argued that a source text sits closer to local identity than its translation, but this ignores that Ménard's version of Quixote and therefore translation and recreation as a whole, is 'infinitely richer' because of its new contexts.⁴⁰ Levine also writes that translation 'ensures the original's survival anew', suggesting that if a

³⁶ Balderston, p.114

³⁷ Jonathan Arac, "Anglo-Globalism?", *New Left Review*, 16 (2002), p.40

³⁸ Borges, *Fictions* p.171

³⁹ Bolaño, *Distant Star*, p.19 and Bolaño, *Estrella Distante*, p.14

⁴⁰ Borges, p.40

translation exists, people will seek out its original.⁴¹ Therefore, translation also embodies the uneasy relationship between local and global that both Borges and Bolaño express within their work.

Latin American literature exemplifies the peripheral nature of its continent of origin and this is clear in Borges and Bolaño's work. Borges's *Fictions* reflects the tension between local and global elements from his position *en las orillas* of both the world-system and modernity. He communicates a yearning for the Western literary core, a *deseo de mundo*, as demonstrated by his preoccupation with Western literary forms and philosophy but this does not overpower national elements. Bolaño's *Distant Star* shares the same awkward position between local and global elements due to a similar exploration of genre and philosophy. Uniquely, the context of Pinochet regime in *Distant Star* means that Bolaño's incorporation of Western history and philosophy allows for wider understanding of the local experiences he portrays. However, translation into English connects the writers once again by furthering the global dimension of their work. *Distant Star* is clearly influenced by Borges which complicates Bolaño's position because if Borges is solely a Latin American author, then Bolaño has drawn from a local literary tradition. However, like Sharman's interpretation of Funes, because they write from the periphery, both Borges and Bolaño are not simply Latin American authors; they are complexly so. They simultaneously embody nationalist elements and Western elements, reject them, and create new forms and ideas.

⁴¹ Suzanne Jill Levine, *The Subversive Scribe* (Saint Paul: Graywolf Press, 2009) p.5

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