In Praise of Vain Gestures – Roberto Bolano's *Antwerp*

A peculiar fact about termite-tapeworm-fungus-moss art is that it goes always forward eating its own boundaries, and, likely as not, leaves nothing in its path other than the signs of eager, industrious, unkempt activity. The most inclusive description of the art is that, termite-like, it feels its way through walls of particularization, with no sign that the artist has any object in mind other than eating away the immediate boundaries of his art, and turning these boundaries into conditions of the next achievement.

The best examples of termite art appear in places (...) where the spotlight of culture is nowhere in evidence, so that the craftsmen can be ornery, wasteful, stubbornly self-involved, doing go-for-broke art and not caring what comes of it.
- from Manny Farber's manifesto "White Elephant Art vs. Termite Art"

"The scorn I felt for so-called official literature was great, though only a little greater than the scorn I felt for marginal literature. But I believed in literature: or rather, I didn't believe in arrivisme or opportunism or the whispering of sycophants. I did believe in vain gestures, I did believe in fate."
-from "Total Anarchy: Twenty-Two Years Later", Bolaño's introduction to *Antwerp*

"The only novel that doesn't embarrass me is *Antwerp*." So says Roberto Bolaño in the quote on the back cover of his novel *Antwerp*. As anyone interested in literature knows, Bolaño has by now been as widely acclaimed as any writer in recent times, and he is the rarest kind of cultural/literary phenomenon – one whose work actually merits the wild enthusiasm heaped upon it. So the quote could at first glance seem disingenuous, especially after reading *Antwerp*, which no one in their right mind could prefer over *2666* and *The Savage Detectives*, the two Bolaño novels that have deservedly been the focus of the most the praise. However, it is worth remembering Bolaño's ambivalent relationship to the notion of the writer as cultural hero, as well as his highly critical view of culture in general and literary culture in particular. It is perhaps not hard to imagine why *Antwerp* is the only one of Bolaño's novels that doesn't embarrass him – because it is hardly a novel at all, and certainly not one at risk of becoming a cultural phenomenon. This reversal of the usual shame over the relationship of a flawed early attempt to later more acclaimed achievements is indicative of an important aspect of Bolaño's writing. The recent publication of the first English translation of *Antwerp*, which was written in 1980 but not published in Spanish until 2002, shortly before Bolaño's death, provides occasion to pause and consider this element of Bolaño's work.

One of the most unique and admirable qualities of Bolaño's novels is his lack of reverence for literature. This is not to be mistaken for a lack of love for literature, nor a lack of belief in its possibilities, but Bolaño understands all the ways literature can lead one astray and be led astray itself, all they ways its supposedly noble intentions can unfold into self-justifications and corroborations with forces of oppression and mediocrity and collective, culturally-sanctified insanity. Bolaño's consistent twin subjects are the end of literature and the salvation of literature. For him the only literature that's still conceivable is either one that catalogues all the ways literature has gone and can go wrong (as in *Nazi Literature in the Americas and By Night in Chile*), or one that catalogues the ways one can dedicate oneself to literature outside of the realm of official literature, which locates the existence of true literature outside of literature (as is The Savage Detectives, a book about poets whose poems we never see, in search of a mythic poet who wrote one non-poem/poem composed of squiggled lines and shapes). We could see Bolaño's approach as proceeding along two seemingly distinct paths. One is an attempt to give voice to the forgotten and marginalized characters that, Bolaño suggests, account for the majority of the population on Earth, though they do not figure much in contemporary cultural consciousness. The other path is a quest to turn literature against itself, to uncover and catalogue the numerous ways in which literature is a dirty business, a blind, corrupt, fraudulent, self-deluded ally to all that is worst in the notion of culture. One of Bolaño's unique achievements is in the way these two paths overlap and intertwine in his work, ultimately merging into a single road – one that carries us away from literature, in search of literature (this reaches its pinnacle with 2666).

Bolaño was a poet as young man, one of the founders of the short-lived radical movement Infrarealism, described by Bolaño later as a kind of Latin-American Dadaism (their legacy seems to consist mostly of crashing readings by people like their sworn enemy Octavio Paz). Bolaño didn't start writing prose seriously until he was close to 40, when he was diagnosed with a rare liver condition and realized he only had a few years to live. He decided writing fiction was a better way to make money and thus ensure that his young family would be provided for after he was dead, and so he started writing short stories and novels. This is the way Bolaño explained it anyway, and the last ten years of his life was astonishingly productive (he wrote not only his two long experimental novels *The Savage Detectives* and *2666*, but also over a dozen shorter novels and many short stories). Only in middle age, in the shadow of imminent death and under the inescapable burden of the responsibility of fatherhood was Bolaño able to force himself to move into the realm of "so-called official literature" and culture.

Using Manny Farber's distinction between "termite art" (as described above), and "white elephant art", the term he used for the outdated concept of the masterpiece in European art, we could say that Bolaño is a born termite-artist who later seemed to move, however reluctantly, toward the white elephant realm with his two epoch-defining tomes, *The Savage Detectives* and *2666*. And yet even in these his termite inclinations remained present –is as if with his two long novels Bolaño carved giant elephants to furnish a suicidal feast for his termite instincts. However, in *Antwerp*, his first novel, these instincts are still fully intact and on display. Presented in 51 numbered and titled chapters, many less than a page long, *Antwerp* has no real plot or story. The chapters are a series of fragments, self-conscious observations, descriptions and meditations concerning a handful of recurrent characters, events and locations. Many elements from later Bolaño novels appear in sketch form here, and a fair amount of Bolaño's unique style is present throughout. Bolaño would use himself as a character in much of his fiction, and reading *Antwerp* often feels as though we are reading a novel by one of the young Bolaño characters from his later works. It is written at a point when he had not yet found a way to fully incorporate into his writing either his wild enthusiasm for literature or his suspicion of literature. In *Antwerp*, his reluctance to enter the world of literature and thus, irrevocably, to became an actor in the realm of official culture appears in raw form, as pure obstinateness, frustration, stubbornness, rage. While the novel may ultimately fail on its own terms (though it's not without its rewards), it is more than just a fumbling adolescent attempt that hints at future triumphs, it survives as a testament to the formation of the aesthetic and ethic that are the conditions of Bolaño's later achievements, and it serves as reminder of some of what is most urgent, even moving, in his writing.

-Mike Vass