

LAUGHTER GOES TO WAR:
ROBERTO BOLAÑO AND THE DEMOLITION JOB OF
RITUAL VIOLENCE IN *2666*

by

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ABSTRACT

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Laughter Goes to War: Roberto Bolaño and the Demolition Job of Ritual Violence in *2666*

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Prostitution, oral tradition tells, is the world's oldest profession. Remove the form of payment, and storytelling replaces prostitution as the world's oldest occupation. Oral tradition cannot even tell the story of prostitution without story-telling in its service. Yet for all the jokes told (a form of story-telling in and of itself), and stories told about jokes and why they make us laugh, what constitutes laughter is still a question occupying the world's major thinkers. Perhaps only laughter is older than the studies it inspires and thoughts it occupies. Laughter is related but not limited to humor. Laughter can be found in depiction of events most horrible and depraved, at times most "inappropriate". This critique focuses on such use of laughter, particularly in the works of Roberto Bolaño, as a revelatory literary become wrapped within practices of violence ritualized. Ritualized violence, penned in literary form, as it is.

This thesis argues for the role of laughter in Roberto Bolaño's laughter in *2666*. It posits laughter in *2666* as the crux upon which an abyss of knowledge and experience reaches its vanishing point. Laughter occurs in instances of humor, of the non humorous, but it always occurs. Accounting for why and how, and how the representation of *when, why, how* laughter occurs in a given text and as a philosophical inquiry returns an abyss as cavernous as the throat from which laughter echoes. If laughter can heal, it is not a cure. It can service well-health, but is laughter ever unhealthy? What of health, disaster, trauma, and violence does laughter relate to? While laughter can heal, it can also echo emotional, mental, and collective trauma and disease. In

2666, this adds up to laughter being investigated itself and a new, “interrogated” for the relationship it plays with health, and global violence. Particularly in a work so underscored by violence gone globalized and a distinctly postnational mileau that spans times and geographies only a literary author or Doctor Who could make. It argues for laughter as it precedes and sustains enactment of violent scenes in Bolaño literary world.

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I. FIRST STEP

Prostitution, oral tradition tells, is the world's oldest profession. Remove the form of payment, and storytelling replaces prostitution as the world's oldest occupation. Oral tradition cannot even tell the story of prostitution without story-telling in its service. Yet for all the jokes told (a form of story-telling in and of itself), and stories told about jokes and why they make us laugh, what constitutes laughter is still a question occupying the world's major thinkers. Perhaps only laughter is older than the studies it inspires and thoughts it occupies. Laughter is related but not limited to humor. Laughter can be found in depiction of events most horrible and depraved, at times most "inappropriate". This critique focuses on such use of laughter, particularly in the works of Roberto Bolaño, as a revelatory literary practice wrapped within practices of violence ritualized. Ritualized violence, penned in literary form, as it is.

This thesis argues for the role of laughter in Roberto Bolaño's laughter in *2666*. It posits laughter in *2666* as the crux upon which an abyss of knowledge and experience reaches its vanishing point. Laughter occurs in instances of humor, of the non humorous, but it certainly occurs. Accounting for why and how, and how the representation of *when, why, how* laughter occurs in a given text and as a philosophical inquiry returns an abyss as cavernous as the throat from which laughter echoes. If laughter can heal, it is also a sign of health. Whether or not this is ill health or well health should not be presumed. While it can heal, it can also echo emotional, mental, and collective trauma. In *2666*, this adds up to laughter being investigated itself and a new, "interrogated" for the relationship it plays with health, and global violence. Particularly in a work so underscored by violence gone globalized, and that spans times and geographies only a literary author or Doctor Who could make. It argues for laughter as it precedes and sustains

enactment of violent scenes in the literary Bolaño creates, as much as laughter's positioning as an agent and indicator of violence.

II. IN PURSUIT OF LAUGHTER

Since the earliest philosophical ruminations many a thought tinkerer has attempted a clear concept of laughter. Aristotle puzzled over why it is impossible to tickle oneself. Science has since located the answer in the cerebellum (the area in the back of the brain involved in monitoring movements), but here science does not answer to the question of why laughter is a triggered response to external stimuli and misses Aristotle's foundational point.¹ Fascinated though I am sure Aristotle would be by the advent and advent and advances of neuroscience, the answer of "cerebellum" does not satisfy his fundamental musing. *Why* is it that we laugh as a response to external stimuli? And, by extension, *what*, and *who* makes us laugh and *how* do we account for laughter? Can it *be* accounted for? Is it an emotion? A feeling? An experience?

This thesis accounts for laughter as it occurs in self-exiled Chilean author Roberto Bolaño's posthumously published work *2666*. Weighing in at 2.75 pounds in the original Spanish hardcover and weighing in *on* themes just as heavy—Nazi Germany, global war, the femmicides of bordertown Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, México (that Bolaño fictionalizes as Santa Teresa, Sonora, México), the relationship of major and minor works in literature, literary, film, and cultural entanglements, madness that acts as a contagion, laughter that is as unhealthy as healthy, written through at least a half dozen languages including local slangs and dialects even when "written" in its original "Spanish"—*2666* still takes time for laughter. But why? Why is this so in the "oasis of horror in a desert of boredom," as Bolaño's epigraph from Charles Baudelaire

¹ Sarah-Jayne Blakemore, *Scientific American*, 1.

states? Amongst the weight of this literary world, one might expect laughter to act like a breeze—a cooling mechanism that is at once a coping mechanism. A tall glass of water in literary hell, a single breath between brutalities and the inexplicable. As, however, Carmen Boullosa observes in her 2002 interview of Bolaño for Brooklyn's *Bomb* magazine, "In the eyes of this reader, your [Bolaño's] laughter is much more than a gesture; it's far more corrosive—it's a demolition job" (Boullosa 61).

This analogy of Bolaño's writing to a demolition job, like a wrecking ball, is noted elsewhere independent of its connection to laughter. In Professor of Latin American Literature and Culture Sergio Villalobos-Ruminotts's "A Kind of Hell: Roberto Bolaño and the Return of World Literature, he expounds, "the demolition strategy of his [Bolaño's] prose is not just a repetition of modern criticism aimed at speaking truth to power, but something else, something that requires a consideration of the literary theory that is implicit in Bolaño's works. In this sense, his novels are not just post-nationalist but worldly approaches to the recent history of violence that entail a return to world-literature in which there is no hope for a redemptive, education of humankind, as in a romantic agenda" (194). In Bolaño's divergence from modernism, rests primarily his divergence from mere parody of past form or presentation of it in its own or as its own parody, such as Andy Warhol's Campbell Soup cans. For Bolaño, laughter is fundamentally elusive. What can be identified is only what it *does* (a demolition job), not how it arises, if known, or what it expresses outright. Like a child wetting the bed, it just happens.

The worldly condition of Bolaño's narrative results from and discloses a planetary articulation of the world through global war, involves a radical exhaustion, and permits a question addressed to what in Bolaño's literary figuration is distinct from that of modernism or

more redemptive, romantic figurations.² While not directly addressed to the issue of laughter, this echoes the notion that laughter itself has met with radical exhaustion of its known or typical forms in Bolaño. This alone renders reasonable the pursuit of laughter as a new kind of expression and possible expression of, or context for better understanding, violence and trauma itself. Displaced from its role as coping mechanism, or its status as a redemptive source amidst the chaos of global terror and localized atrocities whose malignancy can no longer be contained, laughter carries a cancer in its throat. It promises to heal according to many an old adage, but it fails miserably in healing anything. It merely sustains life and expresses a basic will to live underscoring all human life, in *2666*. As part four of *2666* concludes, “Hasta en las calles más humildes se oía a la gente reír. Algunas de estas calles eran totalmente oscuras, similares a agujeros negros, y las risas que salían de no se sabe dónde eran la única señal, la única información que tenían los vecinos y los extraños para no perderse” (*2666*, 791).³ Laughter here sustains the movement of life itself in orienting characters local and foreign, and propagating their continued motion and thus life itself. Tumor cells metastasize, and violence spreads as if by metastasis through the repetition of laughter, and ritualization of (ab)normal violence, across the thousand plus pages of *2666*. At best laughter just keeps us moving. Which is worth a lot. But it’s not what laughter was made out to be.

This thesis takes the same laughter that Bouldosa refers to, the laughter of a demolition job, and develops it in the context of ritual and violence. Looking at instances of laughter and their relation to the comic *and* non comic modes, this thesis plants firmly in the ground the

² 194.

³ “Even on the poorest streets people could be heard laughing. Some of the streets were completely dark, like black holes, and the laughter that came from who knows where was the only sign, the only beacon that kept residents and strangers from getting lost” (*2666*, 633).

overarching relationship laughter sustains to normativized violence in Bolaño. It is not merely an accomplice, nor does it merely accent violence with a laugh echoing wickedly amongst the cavernous darkness, laughter *is* fundamentally bound up *in* the repetition of violence. Laughter, if anything, is merely violence in a humanized scale as with the humanized scale of violence in the Stations of The Cross in Catholic ritual—an artistic depiction and enactment of Jesus’s carrying of the cross to his own crucifixion.

Taking laughter as both signal of and bound up within ritual violence, laughter here departs further from its entrenchment in the larger philosophical studies within the field of humor, the comic, and the ironic. This thesis sustains both advancements in the current studies into the comic modes in Bolaño, violence, terror, atrocity, and the horrific in Bolaño; and the limits extant to the larger philosophical investigation of laughter (a notoriously elusive topic) itself.

Contemporary humor theorists consider the subject of laughter, its causes, characteristics, and conditions from a variety of disciplines. These include: biology, philosophy, psychoanalysis, theology, cultural studies, literary studies, neuroscience, folklore, and linguistics.⁴ Turning to 19th and 20th century literary and philosophical perspectives primarily, Charles Baudelaire, Henri Bergson, Sigmund Freud, Georges Bataille, Friedrich Nietzsche, Immanuel Kant, Søren Kierkegaard, Michel Foucault, Jaques Derrida, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Hélène Cixous all contribute. Bergson’s 1900 *Laughter* offers analysis of a particular aspect of the risible, the comic, but offers no account of laughter itself.⁵ Freud’s 1905 “Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious” and 1928 “Humor” offer a psychoanalytic account of laughter, describing humor

⁴ Mikita Brottman, “What’s So Funny About 9/11?”

⁵ Bataille, 90.

as a result primarily of the dynamics between relations of the consciousness and unconsciousness. Not until the 1980s with Bataille and Nancy, is laughter again posited as its own problem, and prodded as an unknown, rather than something *to be* or that *can be* known, Laughter in Roberto Bolaño's *2666* and *Amulet* faces the same problem. It remains in the field of the unknown, its silent presence cavernous, constituting an abyss.

Even, however with a scientific answer to Aristotle's tickling quandry and the additions of the aforementioned theorists, "So far. . . we have not said anything about laughter. This is not surprising, if we remember how difficult and uncertain it has always been to integrate laughter within the philosophical" as Jean-Luc Nancy ascertains in his 1986 "Wild Laughter in the Throat of Death" (271). In the case of Bolaño, laughter serves as more than just a side effect of the comic or humor or irony.⁶ Laughter instead underpins the development of violence in the text, while sustaining a relationship to humor, the comic, and irony. In so doing, the present analysis turns away from the mere comic study of laughter, and from the more typical tendency to locate the problem of laughter as that of identifying what inspires laughter.

Laughter is then posited as itself an instance of ritual violence. Related to both the eruption and occurrence of coitus and violence, laughter sustains the motif of abyss that runs across *2666*, and turns the abyss in on itself, suggesting abyss is more than just black hole or infinitude. Rather than a darkness that swallows or contains the infinite, the abyss is accounted for as that which *cannot be filled* but is not, apriori, assumed infinite. The abyss is, instead, a condition, and a condition of the limits of articulation itself and the unknown that is its very liminality. It takes faith to believe there is in the abyss something to be located or affirmed

⁶ Jean-Luc Nancy, "Wild Laughter in the Throat of Death", 271.

concretely without concrete proof. Yet faith also is required to affirm there is *nothing* that exists beyond an epistemic void in the case of laughter simply because laughter is unknowable and unaffirmable in precisely its form and contours. Laughter is clearly a known phenomenon and something familiar, if only even on the human scale by our individual experience and collective recognition of it as an experience we all have. This thesis, then, is staunchly “agnostic” in exploring the possibility and confirmability we can *know* what laughter is and that it exists *as such* fully or the unconfirmability we can know something *of* laughter and what it is as cause for claiming laughter is, therefore, unconfirmable or unknowable fully. This thesis maintains we can know something of laughter, without needing to either affirm or assert laughter can be or *is* known fundamentally.

What is articulated on behalf of laughter cannot evade what remains inarticulate or unarticulated by laughter. What laughter itself articulates, is unknown. But laughter, nonetheless, *does* articulate. Laughter, in contrast to how Bataille frames it, is not *the* unknown. It is simply *an* unknown. “There remains, perhaps, just one last theory, which has at least, to its credit, its dependence on the most outstanding and essential quality of preceding ones: *their failure*” Bataille proclaims in his 1986 “Un-Knowing: Laughter and Tears” (90). Laughter, for Bataille is: joyous, obviously and always unforeseeable, observable and definable in its thematic content, associated with objects both joyous and non, part of a range of possible reactions to one situation, kin to the sacred and poetic experience, kin to the experience of sacrifice, revelatory of an ultimate truth, capable of being further clarified, synonymous with the risible and, most significantly, theoretically unknown and *unknowable*. Its effects and causes are known, but of the experience in realtime, laughter remains cavernous. In terms of the inarticulate, laughter is not just inarticulate in substance. It is not merely accompanied by inarticulate noises. Laughter is

fundamentally inarticulate. Relaying a story of a visit to a university morgue with his doctor friend, the old man from whom Archimboldi ultimately purchases his first typewriter recounts, “No supe qué contestarle [el amigo médico que acompaña al depósito de cadáveres] Añadió: el humo perjudica a los muertos. Me reí. Dio una nota explicativa: el humo perjudica su conservación. Hice un gesto que en nada me comprometería” responds the old man who sells Archimboldi his first typewriter during his recounting of a conversation with a doctor friend of his at a university morgue (2666, 988).⁷ What does laughter here articulate then? That which cannot be articulated otherwise.

Identifying the state and status of laughter often seems impossible. The conditions of its impossibility, however, are only delimited by fixation on empirical ends. Theoretical ends are nonetheless their own end, and have proven in the “hard sciences” and other fields to validate their own consideration and status. Discovered on March 14, 2013, the Higgs Boson could not have been confirmed in the absence of its first theorization in 1964. Laughter may have no such location in the hard sciences, but theorizing it is an exercise that, as of yet, yields new and revelatory results. Postulation is, then, where new knowledge proves its own consistent (re)production, meritorious of its own accord.

The first character introduced in 2666 is nineteen year old French student of German literature, Jean-Claude Pelletier. He will become one of the four academic literary critics and protagonists of part one “The Part About the Critics” (the other three being the Spanish Manuel Espinoza, the Italian Pierre Morini, and the British Liz Norton). The reader is first to introduced

⁷ “I didn’t know what to answer. He [the doctor friend at the university morgue] added: smoke is harmful to the dead. I laughed. He supplied an explanatory note: smoke interferes with the process of preservation. I made a noncommittal gesture” (2666, 789).

to the name and works of Benno von Archimboldi when Pelletier is himself. Foregrounding the search of these four critics or, as also described and more accurately cited “enthusiasts” of Benno von Archimboldi for the elusive author rumored to be a future Pulitzer Prize winner himself, Archimboldi serves as MacGuffin in part one of *2666*. From the outset, Archimboldi is shrouded in mystery. Just as much, the line between the serious and the joking, and the ambiguity of meaning, sense-making, and intelligibility, are also foregrounded.⁸ They are shrouded in mystery insofar and as much as they are shrouded in incomfirmability, in liminality.

III. LAUGHTER ESCALATES

The reader and Pelletier both first encounter Archimboldi Christmas Day 1980 in Paris, France. The book in question is *D'Arsonval*.⁹ Pelletier is stirred with wonder and admiration by the text and is, from that day forward, an Archimboldian enthusiast who will, by partial consequence, turn literary critic by trade. Setting on a quest to find more works by the author, he encounters nary a reference within the university's German department. Additionally, “Sus profesores no habían oído hablar de él [Archimboldi]. Uno de ellos le dijo que su nombre le sonaba de algo. Con furor (con espanto) Pelletier descubrió al cabo de diez minutos que lo que le sonaba a su profesor era el pintor italiano” (*2666*, 15).¹⁰ Continuing on his quest, Pelletier forges ahead by searching for information on the first name. The reader finds out along with Pelletier, “El nombre de Archimboldi aparecía en un diccionario sobre literatura alemana y en una revista

⁸ *2666*, 3.

⁹ *2666*, 15. “El libro en cuestión era *D'Arsonval*”.

¹⁰ “Pelletier's professor had never heard of him. One said he thought he recognized the name. Ten minutes later, to Pelletier's outrage (and horror), he realized that the person his professor had in mind was the Italian painter” Bolaño narrates (*2666*, 3).

belga dedicada, nunca supa si en broma o serio, a la literature prusiana” (2666, 16).¹¹ Whether in jest or seriously, no one is sure. Bolaño never confirms this point, nor is there a point at which it can be determined independently by reader. The joke is either in its being a joke itself (in other words, the reader should know whether it would or even could be a joke, i.e. “laughable” that [such] a text be dedicated to the literature of Prussia) or in there being nothing laughable in it at all. Either way, Pelletier’s uncertainty as to whether the intention is joke or serious indicates a joke only laughable because of either its unknown status or the belief one already holds it *should* be funny or laughable as a (pre-presumed) preposterous proposition.

This is the first instance relating to “comic” elements in 2666. However, there *is* no laughter at this moment, and this thesis only connects it to laughter insofar as laughter is not intrinsic to, nor principally related to joking in 2666. The presence of joking in the absence of laughter is a fundamental theme and condition of laughter in 2666 and gives rise to the very nature in which laughter points more verily to violence and the eruption of embodied paroxysms, often orgasmic, directly related to the act of coitus, and/or sexual[ized] violence, throughout 2666.

While in Paris to visit Norton, Pelletier, Espinoza, and Norton get into a cab following dinner. Drunk and happy as children, a discussion opens of jealousy and its very sweetness and in some cases, the delectable scars left behind. It cannot be left unsaid that Pelletier and Espinoza have both independently and, for a time period in which it was mutually known to all, simultaneously been lovers of Norton herself. Norton will, nonetheless, following a

¹¹ “The name Archimboldi appeared in a dictionary of German literature and in a Belgian magazine devoted—whether as a joke or seriously, he never knew—to the literature of Prussia” (2666, 3).

ménage à trois in Santa Teresa, Sonora, México (fictionalized Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, México) and while following a lead on the whereabouts of the ever still elusive Archiboldi (a trip during which, as with this in Paris, the invalid Morini will be absent), leave both Espinoza and Pelletier for Morini. The “third man” giving rise to this discussion of jealousy, Pritchard, will also be left behind by Norton for Morini.

To clarify before advancing, the ménage à trois that occurs eventually among Pelletier, Espinoza, and Norton, occurs after the 1997 beating of a taxi cab driver in Paris. Now 2001, all three have travelled to Santa Teresa having heard Archiboldi might be there. Though they will not find Archiboldi, Archiboldi has in fact travelled to Santa Teresa to help his nephew Klaus Haas who was imprisoned in 1995 in connection with the killings of women as part four, “The Part About the Crimes,” explicates. The critics were further connected to Archiboldi through their resulting connection with Chilean born Professor Óscar Amalfitano (born 1951 the reader is told) who holds a teaching position at the university in Santa Teresa (in addition to having read and translated one of Archiboldi’s works—*The Endless Rose*—in 1974). Eventually the “threesome” referred to as so oft imagined by each comes to fruition during their 2001 quest to Santa Teresa.

Like the beating itself of the cab driver, described hereinafter, this threesome will lead to Norton’s taking a “break” from Espinoza and Pelletier for an indefinite period, this time in the form of a flight back to western Europe and ultimate romantic alliance with Morini, who stayed behind from the Santa Teresa travels citing his doctor’s recommendation he not travel. But as of yet, the actualization has yet to happen; once it does, what will still remain unfulfilled at that time and by the first part of *2666*’s close, is the locating of Archiboldi himself. The critics will have all then only thus fulfilled their own carnal desires and their desires to be affirmed as

literary figures and experts, but not the fulfillment of their ultimate purpose and desire, to meet the man which brought them all together and aroused their mutual enthusiasm to begin with.

But back in Paris, together in the cab, “el taxista, un paquistaní, durante los primeros minutos los observó por el espejo retrovisor, en silencio, como si no diera crédito a sus oídos, y luego dijo algo en su lengua y el taxi pasó por Hamersworth Park y el Imperial War Museum, por Brook Street y luego por Austral y luego por Geraldine, dando la vuelta al parquet, una maniobra a todas luces innecesaria” (2666, 101).¹² The silence forebodes and foreshadows. The silence here noted as characteristic of the cab driver’s apparent incredulity, is already held responsible for itself. In a 2005 interview with Bolaño for Barcelona’s *Turia*, Eliseo Álvarez speaks on the topic of silence with Bolaño. He comments “One of your characters [Sebastián Urrutia Lacroix in *By Night in Chile*] says, ‘One has the moral obligation to be responsible for one’s actions and for one’s words but also for one’s silence,’” then asks “is that also fair to say about writers” (89)? Bolaño responds no, but then adds that in predetermined real-life moments “yes”, it is fair. He doesn’t mince words— “If I’m walking down the street and see a pedophile molesting a kid and I stop and silently stare, not only am I responsible for my silence but I am also a complete son of a bitch,” he explains (Álvarez, 89).

What ensues is further discussion of the romantic quadrangle between Norton and Pritchard, Norton and Espinoza, and Norton and Pelletier. The cab driver, further confused when already disoriented by Espinoza’s unhelpful mentioning “que el taxista, sin sin proponérselo,

¹² “[F]or the first few minutes, the driver, a Pakistani, watched them in his rearview mirror, in silence, as if he couldn’t believe what his ears were hearing, and then he said something in his language and the cab passed Hamersworth Park and the Imperial War Museum, heading along Brook Drive, and then Austral Street and then Geraldine Street, driving around the park, an unnecessary maneuver no matter how you looked at it” (2666, 73).

coño, claro, había citado a Borges” following the cab drivers confession “el laberinto que era Londres haber conseguido disorientarlo,” erupts in anger at the three critics (2666, 102).¹³

Following Espinoza’s mention, Norton mentions further that the trope of London-as-labyrinth does not even belong to Borges initially, correcting Espinoza that it derives from English born Charles Dickens and Robert Stevenson. Notably, Borges is Argentine, Espinoza Spanish, and, like Dickens and Stevens, Norton English born. The egos flare and the squabble ensues.

Drunkenly, as it continues, this argument incites the cabbie who bursts out in frustration that:

[P]odía no conocer a ese mentado Borges, y que también no podía haber leído nunca a esos mentados señores Dickens y Stevenson, y que incluso tal vez aún no conocía lo suficientemente bien Londres y sus calles y que por esa razón la había comparado con un laberinto, pero que, por contra, sabía muy bien lo que era decencia y la dignidad y que, por lo que había escuchado, la mujer aquí presente, es decir Norton, carecía de decencia y dignidad, y que en su país eso tenía un nombre, el mismo que se le daba en Londres, qué casualidad, y que ese nombre era el de puta, aunque también era lícito utilizar el nombre de perra o zerra o cerda, y que los señores aquí presentes, señores que no eran ingleses a juzgar por su acento, también tenían un nombre en su país y ese nombre era de chulos o macarras o macrós o cafiches.¹⁴ (2666, 102)

¹³ “[A]ll be damned if he [the cab driver] didn’t just quote Borges” . . . “London was such a labyrinth, he had really lost his bearings” (2666, 73).

¹⁴ “[H]e might not know this Borges, and he might not have read the famous Dickens and Stevenson either, and he might not even know London and its streets as well as he should, that’s why he’d said they were like a labyrinth, but he knew very well what decency and dignity were, and by what he heard, the woman here present, in other words Norton, was lacking in decency and dignity, and in his country there was a word for what she was, the same word they used in

The Archimboldians, taken by surprise and slow to respond, finally manage after several streets to blurt “stop this filthy car, we’re getting out right here”. Having stepped out to the curb, then hearing the fare and realizing fare was (still) expected, Espinoza (where Pelletier and Norton Bolaño comments were obviously still reeling from the surprise) loses it as he steps down, opens the driver’s door, jerks the unsuspecting driver out, and rains a torrent of Iberian kicks down upon him. Pelletier joins in kicking the cab driver while he’s already down and in spite of Norton’s objections. Violence solves nothing and in fact the Pakistani driver would only now hate the English all the more Norton appeals while Pelletier and Espinoza deliver kick after kick, topping it off with a xenophobically laced diatribe:

[M]étete el islam por el culo, allí es donde debe estar, esta patada es por Salmon Rushdia (un autor que ambos, por otra parte, consideraban más bien malo, pero cuya mención les pareció pertinente), esta patada es de parte de las feministas de París (parad de una puta vez, les gritaba Norton), esta patada es de parte del fantasma de Valerie Solanas, hijo de mala madre, y así, hasta dejarlo inconsciente y sangrando por todos los orificios de cabeza, menos por los ojos.¹⁵ (2666, 103)

This is the first major explosion of violence in *2666* and, prior to the actual occurrence of ménage à trois in Santa Teresa for the three critics, at this moment “[e]ra como si, por fin,

London as it happened, and the word was *bitch* or *slut* or *pig*, and the gentlemen here present, gentlemen who, to judge by their accents, weren’t English, also had a name in his country and that name was *pimp* or *hustler* or *whoremonger*” (2666, 73).

¹⁵ “[S]hove Islam up your ass, which is where it belongs, the one is for Salmon Rushdie (an author who neither of them happened to think was much good but whose mention seemed pertinent), this one is for the feminists of Paris (will you fucking stop, Norton was shouting), this one is for the ghost of Valerie Solanas, you son of a bitch, and on and on, until he was unconscious and bleeding from every orifice in the head, except the eyes” (2666, 74).

hubieron hecho el *ménage à trois* con el que tanto habían fantaseado” (2666, 103).¹⁶ As for silence, there is little—other than the cab driver’s when he first signals by his silence his being upset, and the silence of his being left, like Schrödinger’s cat, left in the minds of all unknown whether dead or alive until further notice. Like the man Óscar Fate (who is not really Óscar Fate but Quincy Williams by birth name) hits and nearly kills in part three, the cab driver will never be fully confirmed alive or dead—reality will never fully collapse into one or the other, meaning the cab driver and the man Fate hits are, as far as the text maintains, more or less dead. Sent last minute to cover the light-heavyweight boxing match in Santa Teresa, México of American Count Pickett after the sportswriter for the Harlem paper for which he writes, *Amanecer Negro*, is mysteriously killed (Fate is a news and political correspondent typically), Fate ultimately attends a gathering after the actual match has occurred.¹⁷ At this gathering, towards the end of the night, “perhaps sensing that he is in the presence of the serial murderers [or who he assumes to be possibly among the serial murderers of the Santa Teresa women killers] . . . perhaps inspired by the fight [of Count Pickett], perhaps fearing for a young woman’s safety, perhaps hoping to prove his worth so as to win the hand of this woman, or perhaps just losing control, Fate nearly kills a man (he is not sure) with a punch” (Levinson 179). This status of dead, not quite dead yet, or possibly alive, is the vanishing point for these victims of violence (the Pakistani cab driver and the man Fate hits), but only in the sense they vanish from the texts pages, left alive or dead. The ambiguity between dead and alive here resonates the ambiguity often noted between whether folks are joking or serious elsewhere in 2666.

¹⁶ “[i]t was as if they had finally had the *ménage à trois* they’d so often dreamed of. Pelletier felt as if he had come. Espinoza felt the same, to a slightly different degree. Norton, who was staring up at them without seeing them in the dark, seemed to have experienced multiple orgasms” Bolaño narrates (74).

¹⁷ Levinson, 179

Worth noting is Norton's being silenced. Referent to her appearing to have experienced multiple orgasms after the act, during the act Norton said no, and Norton plead for Pelletier and Espinoza to stop. Whether or not she wished the hail of kicks to stop is ultimately unconfirmed. The only thing the reader can confirm is double-fold: a resonance of violation, of rape, as much as a possible resonance of ecstatic pleasure. The two are not mutually exclusive. It is certainly not unheard of for a person to cry "stop, stop, stop" or "no, no, no" whilst in the throes of passion, and actually mean "please *don't* stop, please keep going". Yet, again, Norton *did* said no and Norton *did* said stop. Without intonation and bound by the absence of further description or indication, the case remains either, and if we extend the issue of rape fantasy, possibly both, in 2666.

So again, here, even Norton herself without the reader having further information or being able to hear Norton's actual intonation, Norton is left possibly "violated" as much as possibly "not violated". This is extremely different from the one hundred and twelve corpses of women counted across part four as inspired by the actual body count and descriptions of such bodies found in the real-world Mexican investigative reporter Sergio González Rodríguez's non-fiction journalistic text (González Rodríguez also being a character Bolaño inserts into his part four) first published in 2006, *Huesos en el desierto*. All one hundred and twelve of those corpses (counted twice by the author of this thesis) arrive to the text definitively dead, and the vast majority have traces of definite rape (vaginal and anal most commonly) and, in several cases, mutilation. What remains ambiguous in *these* cases is who the perpetrators are, who might be complicit, whether justice is obstructed and by whom precisely and why. It is, then, in those instances exactly how and why the cases are closed, but the crimes never "solved"—or, in other words, justice itself, that remains vague and serves as a vanishing point. Cases close, some

victims die, some victims do not—but several stories or events simply do not “conclude” in 2666.

The suggestion is not that multiple orgasms or lack thereof cannot, can, do, or do not occur in instances of rape *or* rape fantasies, but that the allusion remains to sexual intercourse and the explicit comments of Norton against Espinoza and Pelletier. This constitutes an allusion to rape, and a continuance of the act in the presence of female Norton’s verbalized objection, the one herself insulted first and maligned just as Espinoza so maligns the unknown woman and Pakistani cab driver’s mother, being no better and it’s reasonable to suggest far worse, in himself calling the uninvolved woman a bitch himself.

While “son of a bitch” is indeed a figure of speech, the spontaneity with which it spills from Espinoza’s mouth without further thought, steepens him in the automatization of ritual act. The constancy of vaginal and anal rape evidenced in the one hundred and twelve female corpses counted across part four, “The Part About the Crimes” of 2666 are relevant here. Corpses accounted for in the form of police report and inspired from the *actual* corpses recounted *Huesos in el desierto* insofar as any objection, either from the woman violated or from larger society and social movements fighting against the femicides rape, anal and vaginal, occurs in the one hundred and twelve corpses counted across part four, that allude to the actual corpses that are accounted in the form of cold police reports interspersed with narratives on the cops, journalists, and other officials in “The Part About the Crimes”, further positions Espinoza, Pelletier, and by extension all the critics, in this ritualization of rape and murderous violence. And the futility with which it is fought against. Futility is not to be confused or equated with apathy. But it remains, all cases unsolved but closed (“*se cerró el caso*” [the case was closed]), that the objections and fights against this normativized violence, remain successfully unchallenged.

By the time the reader later learns that Archimboldi is the pseudonym of German former soldier (Hans Reiter) turned author (Archimboldi) in part five, “The Part About Archimboldi”, the theme of joking or seriousness, its variant ambiguity, and the effects of such ambiguity, still resonate. Having searched for and found a typewriter of which he will make purchase:

Al día siguiente volvió y le mostró el dinero, pero entonces el Viejo pedía el dinero por adelantado y aquella misma noche, en el bar, Reiter pidió y obtuvo varios préstamos de las chicas. Al día siguiente volvió y le mostró el dinero, pero entonces el Viejo sacó una libreta de un escritorio y quiso saber su nombre. Reiter dijo lo primero que se le pasó por la cabeza. –Me llamo Benno con Archimboldi. El viejo entonces lo miró a los ojos y le dijo que no se pasara de listo, que cuál era su nombre verdadero. –Mi nombre es Benno von Archimboldi, señor –dijo Reiter–, y usted cree que estoy bromeando lo mejor será que me vaya.¹⁸ (2666, 981)

Here, Reiter formalizes his new identity, doing violence to himself by giving death to his old identity but also giving life anew by birthing his own new identity, but also does so for reasons motivated by violent acts which inspired the name change. Having strangled Leo Sammer (a war criminal and “killer of Jews”) to death in a United States prisoner of war camp, Reiter feels it necessary to undergo this name change to protect himself and his wife Ingeborg.¹⁹ This pen

¹⁸ The next day he [Hans Reiter] returned and showed the old man [selling the typewriter] the money, but then the man took an accounting book out of his desk and wanted to know his name. Reiter said the first thing that came into his head. ‘My name is Benno von Archimboldi.’ The old man looked him in the eye and said don’t play games with me, what’s your real name? ‘My name is Benno von Archimboldi, sir,’ said Reiter, ‘and if you think I’m joking I’d better go.’ For a few seconds both were silent. (784).

¹⁹ 2666, 801.

name, then, while it may seem an arbitrary choice, to the point of its actual preposterousness (who would name their child or chose to be called “Benno von Archimboldi”, especially a German), is anything but. It is both necessary as a codification of Reiter’s/Archimboldi’s new identity and as a rite of passage.

IV. LAUGHTER IS BORN AND IDENTITIES TRANSFORM

In the Pentateuch, which we turn to below more intensively, the first changing of name as granted by God, of Abram to Abraham and Sarai to Sarah, marks precisely such a passage. It marks a covenant with God that upon bearing Isaac at age ninety, the until-then barren Sarai and the ninety nine at the time Abram, will fulfill their covenant in which they are bound to God of doing so, with the trade in exchange of both having child, and parenting many nations to come. In 2666 there is no covenant with God or an outside source technically, but there is a plea from a mystic Reiter follows as advised by the fortune teller to change his name and not make the proverbial mistake of so many in English whodunnit novels of “returning to the scene of the crime”. Advice given, Archimboldi makes a covenant with his writer self and entrusts himself to the advice of the seer, marking out his position as writer and official transition from ex-soldier to writer. This formalizes the sense in which *The Part About Archimboldi*, furthermore, is a *Künstlerroman*. Bolaño plays on many genres in his work, and the *Künstlerroman*, a subgenre of the *bildungsroman*, is not exempt. The *bildungsroman* established as it was as a German genre first, is a story of self-development. The *Künstlerroman*, more specifically, is a story about an artist’s self-development—an artist's growth to maturity. It is in this sense Bolaño’s choice is neither arbitrary thematically in terms of the resonance with *Sammer*, *or* literarily, in terms of Bolaño’s own development and interweavings that resonate multiple different literary genres, playing off of many but refusing to ever fully fulfill any *one* among the many.

In the literary sense, then, this is also not an arbitrary choice for Bolaño. When discussion comes up between Reiter and his wife Ingeborg as to whether he has killed anyone, Reiter responds “yes” he’d killed a German. Ingeborg inquires if the victim at hand is a woman. “No, no era una mujer –dijo Reiter, y se rió–, era un hombre” (2666, 970).²⁰ Talking further about the matter the following week, Reiter mentions the possibility that the American and German police were looking for him and that his name was on a list of suspects. Reiter explicates, “Todo esto ocurrió en un campo de prisioneros . . . No sé quién se pensó Sammer que yo era, pero no paraba de contarme cosas. Estaba nerviosa porque la policía norteamericana lo iba a interrogar. Por precaución, se había cambiado de nombre. Se hacía llamar Zeller. Pero yo no creo que la policía norteamericana buscara a Sammer. Tampoco buscaba a Zeller. Para los norteamericanos Zeller y Sammer eran dos ciudadanos alemanas fuera de toda sospecha” (2666, 971).²¹ As with Bolaño’s doublings that are not-quite-doublings, Reiter and Sammer here mirror each other in some aspects but not others. The resonance cannot technically be said to *mean* anything beyond its own internal reference. Both are linked through the coincidence (in terms of plot, but not in terms of Bolaño’s choice as author), of major life events, their possible legal or penal implications, and the ensuing name change that occurs. This same kind of mirroring-that-doesn’t-quite-mirror is further reflected in this same section.

²⁰ “No, it wasn’t a woman,” said Reiter, and he laughed, ‘it was a man.’ Ingeborg laughed too” (2666, 775).

²¹ “All of this happened in a prisoner-of-war camp. . . I don’t know who Sammer thought I was, but he kept telling me things. He was nervous because the American police were going to interrogate him. As a precaution, he had changed his name. He called himself Zeller. But I don’t think the American police were looking for Sammer. They weren’t looking for Zeller either. As far as the Americans were concerned, Zeller and Sammer were two German citizens above any suspicion” (2666, 776).

Between the affirmation of Reiter to Ingeborg that he is not a lady killer, and the explication on the German he killed in the prisoner of war camp, Reiter folds back into his own nephew, Klaus Haas, the German imprisoned in Santa Teresa for his implications with the femicides there. Haas is both a lady killer and, by the end of *The Part About Archimboldi* we learn, also in a relationship with his lawyer—a woman technically in love with a lady killer. After Reiter then Ingeborg each laugh in the above passage, Ingeborg “se puso a hablar sobre la atracción que sienten algunas mujeres por los asesinos de mujeres. El prestigio de los asesinos de mujeres entre las putas, por ejemplo, o entre las mujeres dispuestas a amar hasta los límites. Para Reiter esas mujeres eran histéricas. Para Ingeborg, por el contrario, esas mujeres, que decía conocer, sólo eran jugadoras, más o menos como los jugadores de cartas . . . —En ocasiones —dijo Ingeborg—, cuando estamos haciendo el amor y tú me coges del cuello, he llegado a pensar que eras un asesino de mujeres” (2666, 970).²²

Here, while the thematic doubling of killing women and women who love the men who kill them has no *direct* meaning, it literally signifies nothing beyond itself, what it does allow is open possibility of otherness and the otherness that *could* be. As with Haas, Reiter literally *could be* Haas—a lady killer. Bolaño’s word choice underscores this. “Nunca he matado a una mujer [I’ve never killed a woman]”, but he still could and his nephew will, and “[n]i se me ha pasado por la cabeza [such a thing never occurred to me]” but it still could (2666, 970). It is left unknown whether the thought once planted could arouse him or seems suggestive, and, in truth,

²² “[B]egan to talk about the way some women were attracted to men who killed women. About the high-regard in which women-killers were held by whores, for example, by women who choose to love without reservations. In Reiter’s opinion these women were hysterics. But Ingeborg, who claimed to know women of the sort, believed they were just gamblers, like cardplayers, more or less . . . ‘Sometimes,’ said Ingeborg, when we’re making love and you grab me by the neck, I’ve thought you might be a woman-killer.’ ‘I’ve never killed a woman,’ said Reiter. ‘Such a thing never even occurred to me’” (2666, 775-6).

is related in some way already to the pleasure he has received in *taking pleasure* in a woman while also, albeit within safe limits, taking pleasure of depriving her mobility and possible life blood temporarily during erotic asphyxiation.

Turning back to the dedication to Prussia in “The Part About the Critics” compared with the choice of “Benno von Archimboldi” in “The Part About Archimboldi”, and the not knowing whether there is a joke meant or sincerity intended, what is ambiguous in the first is the dedication of the text to the proud, military addled Prussia and in the second, the hardly known Italian sounding name Archimboldi himself. The two instances share one feature: Prussia and Benno von Archimboldi appear equally preposterous. There is no laughter, but the unknown and fundamental quality of laughter remains (an) unknown. What matters most, is that it is not trivial. In laughing off a problem, we treat it as trivial, and here, both laughter and author, are too serious to be trivialized. The irony and mordant wit of Bolaño does not, ultimately, permit total cynicism.²³ Permitting total cynicism would be to permit apathy, and in Bolaño, the point in the face of such violence and the fundamental abyss of being, of life and death, is the struggle against but sheer incorrigibility of futility in the struggle against the recurrence of trauma and violence—of horror as much as the horrific. This is not to say resistance or even revolution are futile, but that fighting against the abyss of death, and halting persistent violence in the world, have so far proven futile. What does remain, however, is the will to laugh, capacity for laughter, and, by extension, *live*.

In the study of comic and ironic modes in Bolaño, an examination of laughter remains that is neither a description of his works as darkly humorous, nor a comment on the comic and

²³ John Morreall, *Comic Relief*, 102.

ironic modes, the “rhetorical devices”, with which he writes. Researching laughter and the comic mode in Bolaño yielded studies of the theoretical device of irony and commentary on Bolaño’s dark humor and mordant wit. Villalobos-Ruminott contends Bolaño’s narrative is an example of public irony and mordant criticism related to many modern traditions.²⁴ Villalobos-Rumonitt further contests that Bolaño cannot be reduced to writer-moralist or writer-partisan proper to the modern period arguing instead Bolaño’s novels “express the exhaustion of the modern articulation between literature and the public space of reading that granted to it a particular social function” (194). Mordant wit and irony, then, while related to past traditions, are denied the same role as social function Villalobos-Ruminott claims for them in modern times.

This exhaustion is not by dint of being *exhaustive*. The exhaustion here expressed is, instead, the very *exhausting* of the possibility Bolaño’s works serve or act to grant a certain social function at all. Laughter, however, is at a remove and is not just a side effect, as above noted, of the comic, humorous, or ironic. Laughter, instead, in Bolaño, serves as a precursor to and enactment of violence that repeats its patterns sufficiently in *2666* to engage a ritualized status. The production of laughter in Bolaño literature implies a consciousness being aware of and responding to the unknown or unassimilatable at the very core.²⁵ This is the same with ritual—it constitutes a codified engagement with the mystical and spiritual which, while faith sustains belief in it, remains fundamentally unknown.

Cuando Archiboldi le enseñó la carta a Ingeborg ésta se mostró sorprendida porque ignoraba quién era ese tal Benno von Archomboldi. –Soy yo, por supuesto –le dijo Archiboldi. –¿Y por qué te has cambiado de nombre? –quiso saber.

²⁴ “A Kind of Hell”, 194.

²⁵ Adrienne Janus, “Laughter in Joyce and Beckett”, 164.

Tras pensárselo un momento Archimboldi respondió que –Tal vez los Americanos me están buscando –dijo–. Tal vez los policías americanos y alemanes hayan atado cabos sueltos. –¿Cabos sueltos por un criminal de guerra? –dijo Ingeborg. – La justicia es ciega –le record Archimboldi. –Ciego cuando le conviene –dijo Ingeborg–, ¿y a quién le conviene que salgan a relucir los trapos sucios de Sammer? ¡A nadie! –Nunca se sabe –dijo Archimboldi–. En cualquier caso lo más seguro para mi es que se olviden de Reiter. Ingeborg le miró sorprendida. –Estás mintiendo –dijo. –No, no miento –dijo Archimboldi e Ingeborg le creyó, pero más tarde, antes de que él se marchara a trabajar, le dijo con una enorme sonrisa: –¡Tú estás seguro de que vas a ser famoso! Hasta ese momento Archimboldi nunca había pensado en la fama. Hitler era famoso. Goering era famoso. La gente que él amaba o que recordaba con nostalgia no era famosa, sino que cubría ciertas necesidades.²⁶ (2666, 1003)

²⁶ When Archimboldi showed Ingeborg the letter she was surprised because she didn't know who Benno von Archimboldi was. 'It's me, of course,' said Archimboldi. 'Why did you change your name?' she wanted to know. After thinking about it for a moment, Archimboldi answered that it was for his safety. 'The Americans might be looking for me,' he said. 'It's possible the American and German police have put two and two together.' 'For the sake of a war criminal?' asked Ingeborg. 'Justice is blind,' Archimboldi reminded her. 'Blind when it suits her,' said Ingeborg, 'and who does it benefit if Sammer's laundry is hung out in public? No one!' 'You never know,' said Archimboldi. 'In any case it's safest for me if Reiter is forgotten.' Ingeborg looked at him, surprised. 'You're lying,' she said. 'No, I'm not lying,' said Archimboldi, and Ingeborg believed him, but later, before he left for work, she said with an enormous smile: 'You're sure you'll be famous!' Until that moment Archimboldi had never thought about fame. Hitler was famous. Göring was famous. The people he loved or remembered fondly weren't famous, they just satisfied certain needs. (2666, 801)

Post-nationalism maintains more than a mere dissolution of boundaries, particularly as to the question of how that which is “other” becomes evil. The condemnation of laughter and joking is not specific nor limited to ancient times or moral codes. In an editorial piece on the governance of private and public lives by public officials, author, lawyer, and civil libertarian Wendy Kaminer takes on hate crimes and the regulation of laughter related to Colorado State University’s speech code. Recently derided by the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE) as speech code of the month, Colorado State University defines “hate incidents” as expressions of hostility based on the target individual’s race, color, ancestry, national origin, religion, ability, age, gender, socio-economic status, ethnicity, or sexual orientation which, Kaminer notes, adds that examples of these incidents can include verbal or written name-calling, slurs, and jokes.²⁷ Proverbs 26:18-19 warns that “A man who deceives another and then says, ‘it was only a joke,’ is like a madman shooting at random his deadly darts and arrows. Laughter, in both instances—the Bible and the Colorado State University speech code is an expression of hostility and for this reason, an objectionable activity.²⁸ While laughter and joking are often posed in relationship together in studies of one or the other, the most stark effect of their relationship here and in the posing of joking and laughter in literature and speech codes itself, is the very stifling and silencing of both that literature and codification requires. Worth noting is Bataille’s observation that laughter always remains joyous.²⁹

Laughter, in Bolaño, has no auditory aesthetic such as that posed in “Listening to Laughter in Joyce and Beckett”, the 2009 article of Adrienne Janus in *The Journal of Modern Literature*. What is meant by an auditory aesthetic is the written sound of laughter. In Bolaño,

²⁷ “No Laughing Aloud”, Kaminer.

²⁸ John Morreall, *Comic Relief*, 4.

²⁹ “Un-knowing: Laughter and Tears”, 96.

laughter is only inscribed as a character having laughed, or group of characters laughing together. There is no “ha ha ha”, or “hee, hee, hee” in Bolaño. If there were, however, the fundamental difference between this laughter and actual laughter, is that there *is no* auditory quality of literary laughter. It is always only aesthetic.

There is only one person in literature who can be made to laugh outright, and that is the reader. As far as ritual is concerned, laughter in *2666* is sustained in that very relationship. As Janus concludes relative to laughter in Joyce and Beckett, the auditory aesthetic of laughter “points to the actuality of what might be termed ‘otographic texts’: namely, texts that reproduce and ask us to attend to auditory phenomena (song, music, laughter, and murmurs) at the limits of language, and at the limits of conceptual divisions, subject/object, mind/body, poetry/prose, writing/speech, in the attempt to move past these divisions” (164).

It is then not just relevant but notable that this auditory aspect is absent from the laughter in *2666*. As Ignacio López-Vicuña cites in his 2009 “The Violence of Writing: Literature and Discontent in Roberto Bolaño’s ‘Chilean’ Novels”, “Bolaño’s anti-humanist view of literature shares significant elements with the French literary tradition, in particular with ‘*poètes maudits*’ such as Baudelaire and Rimbaud. In these authors poetry cannot make us more human, but it can force us to look at the dark or demonic side of our culture” (156). It is fundamental for the purpose of laughter in this context, that it *not* attempt any such feat as blurring subject/object divisions. The *subject* him or herself is already fundamentally disintegrated, and even to blur such distinctions is to assume a humanizing aspect of the subject. One must *be* a subject, a human subject, before they can be blurred along with and melted into object. The object of laughter, then, remains the *unknown* and the *unknowable* in the sense of Bataille as much as Nancy. “No existe antídoto para el vacío. Ese precipicio al que asoma el vértigo de nuestra

futilidad. La ausencia de uno mismo. El reconocimiento de la finitud de la alma, de la carne, del deseo. Una herrumbe que corroe los pensamientos mientras los años se apilan sobre las espaldas. Pero si no bien existe antídoto contra la vacuidad, el ser humano siempre es capaz de crear ilusión de que su vida tiene un propósito y de que vale la pena vivir por él” (9) Peter Elmore underscores in his 1999 *Las Pruebas del fuego* [Trials by fire].³⁰

Instead, Bolaño interjects laughter in resonance into his works overarching tempo in 2666. The form of his work, riffing off of tempo and repetition of rupture, acts of violence, and silence, depends on certain spacing’s to enunciate its subjects and advance its plot. Like the rhythm of a knock in a fable, laughter must achieve and sustain its relationship to ritual by establishing a pattern within the form of the text itself. In fables and fairytales, subjects knocking on doors always knock three times. It is an established pattern to do so, and it is such because three knocks *establishes a pattern* in and of itself. This is a function of spacing. The open space on the either side of one knock “ _____, dunk, _____ ” is insufficient to establish the *sound* of a knock as a knock at all. Two is better, but it still takes three to establish pattern. The difference between two knocks “ _____, dunk, _____ dunk, _____ ” and three, “ _____, dunk, _____ dunk, _____, dunk, _____ ” is that two knocks leave in question whether the knocking will leave open space, or whether a third knock will seal the pattern itself. While a third knock still *leaves* an open space after the third knock, it seals off the open ended anticipation after just two knocks, asserting itself definitely as an established pattern. A fourth knock is unnecessary, but it is also irrelevant should it occur. After the three

³⁰ “There is no antidote to emptiness. The precipice looming like the vertigo of our futility. The absence of self. The recognition of the finiteness of the soul, the flesh, desire. A rust that corrodes thoughts while the years pile up on the backs. But even if no antidote exists against emptiness, man is always capable of creating the illusion that their life has a purpose, and that it is worth living for living for him” (9). [*Translation mine*]

initial knocks, any subsequent knocking remains unimportant as to whether the knocks are three, two, or more. The pattern has already been established. In the instance of otographic texts, it is common to have either a “ha, ha, ha” or a hee, hee, hee”, but never just a “ha”, *unless* and generally *when* the “ha” is a “ha!”—stated baldly, *unless* and *when* there is some form of punctuation sealing off the laugh. A knock in real world cannot be sealed off with an exclamatory or punctuation otherwise, but in the text it can. Nonetheless this informs as to why it is “knock, knock, knock” or “ha, ha, ha” in texts (for tis mimetic function) *or* generally otherwise a “ha!” when not simply, as in Bolaño, a “Pelletier laughed”, for example.

In Bolaño, there is no element of “otographic text” as Janus has labeled. This thesis nonetheless sustains a relationship between laughter, ritual and thus repetition as formal function, and the very spacing and repetition with which laughter of the “auditory aesthetic” operates, is here nonetheless related. As Levinson observes in his reflection on the form of time and disassociation of the subject from it in 2666, “Time is form as separation, as presence without representation. It is form without idiom or narrative. So too is repetition. We know that the condition of representation, of ‘content’, is convention and ritual, therefore repetition” (181).

This is reflected in 2666 as both a reality, and a problematic. First introduced to the figure in part one, “The Part about the Critics”, of 2666, Archimboldi the reader learns definitively in part five, “The Part About Archimboldi”, that Benno von Archimboldi is the pseudonym for Hans Reiter. It is more than just a pen name, in fact. While it *acts* as his pseudonym, it is also a total change to which, for all persons “Reiter” will henceforth meet, will know him by. As Reiter undresses and shows his wounds to soldiers and civilians alike while in a war camp, one of the German speaking civilians asks in a Berlin accent whether he ate well at the camp. Reiter replies that, “[C]omía como un rey y cuando el que había hecho la pregunta la tradujo para los demás

se rieron. –¿Te gusta la comida americana? –dijo uno de los soldados. El civil tradujo la pregunta y Reiter dijo: –La carne Americana es la mejor carne del mundo.’ Todos volvieron a reírse” (2666, 936).³¹

Already the reader can sense something amiss. There is nothing inherently funny in liking American food. Continuing the dialogue, “‘You’re right,’ said the soldier, but what you’re eating isn’t American food. It’s dog food,” only this time translator (who notably chooses not to translate the answer) and some of the soldiers laugh so hard they fall down. Then, “A black soldier looked in the door with a worried expression on his face and asked whether they were having trouble with the prisoner. They ordered him to close the door and leave, nothing was wrong, they were telling jokes” (2666, 749).

Already, extant theories of laughter enter to inform as to the production of laughter in this scene itself. Here, both superiority and incongruity are at play. As Morreall announces in *Comic Relief*, “In Stanley Milgram’s famous experiments with obedience to authority figures where subjects were ordered to give potentially fatal electric shocks to people simply for not remembering word associations, 14 or 40 subjects suddenly burst out laughing and then administered the shock. Here laughter seems like whistling in the dark, a way to suppress legitimate concern” (102).

This thesis maintains that rather than what the theories explain of the scene, it is the ritualization of humor and hostility that plants laughter as revelatory in function here. Deflecting

³¹ “he ate like a king, and when the one who had asked the question translated for the others, he [the German speaking civilian] laughed. ‘Do you like American food?’ asked one of the soldiers. The civilian translated the question and Reiter said: ‘American meat is the best meat in the world.’ They all laughed again” (2666+, 749).

hostility into humor, excusing it away as “nothing wrong”, “joke telling” becomes the dart of the madman. Bolaño dismembers, creates monstrosities, and remains a staunch contrarian. Studies focusing on the biographical interweaving of Bolaño in his narrative fictions miss the point. While Bolaño certainly has achieved rock star status in the literary world, he is not a rock star. Studies focusing on establishing a firm political position or point of enunciation do the same. Restricting analysis to the “new” and “fresh” of Bolaño’s literary fictions so fervently appearing as they have on the scene, miss the very insistence in Bolaño’s own works that there are no major *or* minor works. The violence Bolaño does to literature and the form itself already calls attention to the violence literature and literary interpretation not merely repeats, but *creates anew* or, “ritualizes” violence in and as literary interpretation.

Of the thirty eight times jokes or joking appear in *2666*, laughter is present fifteen. Fewer than half linked to laughter, only one instance of laughter derives as the primary effect of joking. What is noteworthy here is laughter’s removal already from the field of the specifically comic or humorous. As a feature of Bolaño’s specific conception of laughter in literature, this is already underscored in *Amuleto*. Of the eighteen times a laugh or laughter erupts, there are zero instances of joking. The closest relative of joking in *Amulet* comes in the form of “kidding”. In the narrations of protagonist Auxilio Lacouture, a Uruguayan woman who moved to Mexico in the 1960s and delivers a hallucinatory monologue whilst trapped in the women’s bathroom at the Autonomous University of Mexico during the 1968 invasion and occupation of the university itself: “[E]scucho por un oído sus palabras [las palabras de su amiga Lilian Serpas] y por el otro los gritos que los habituales del café Quito dirigen a los jóvenes del andamio, frases que constituyen un ritual de iniciación masculina, colijo, o frases que pretenden ser cariñosos pero que solo son premonitorias de un desastre que no solo arrastrará a la pareja de pintores de brocha

gorda . . . sino también a ellos, los vociferantes, los que aconsejan, nosotros” (*Amuleto*, 108).³² Notably, this one instance of joking in the form of “kidding”, remains free from any association with laughter—let alone any laughter derivative of joke telling itself. Yet kidding and joking sustain a relationship to ritual. It is mocking and derision in *2666* and *Amulet* alike that are both the precedent to, and instance of, ritual violence.

The monographic misogynist jokes of part four, “The Part About the Crimes” are a salient example of this operation. Their risible content riffs off itself, all jokes being variants of misogynist humor.

A esa misma hora las policías que acababan el servicio se juntaban a desayunar en la cafetería Trejo’s, un local oblongo y con pocas ventanas, parecido a una ataúd. Allí bebían café y comían huevos a la ranchera o huevos a la Mexicana o huevos con tocino o huevos estrellados. Y se contaban chistes. A veces eran monográficos. Los chistes. Y abundaban aquellos que iban sobre mujeres. Por ejemplo, un policía decía, ¿cómo es la mujer perfecta? Pues de medio metro, orejona, con la cabeza plana, sin dientes y muy fea. ¿Por qué? Pues de medio metro para que te llegue exactamente a la cintura, buey, orejona para manejarla con facilidad, con la cabeza plana para tener un lugar donde poner to cerveza, sin dientes para que no te haga daño en la verga y muy fea para que ningún hijo de puta te la robe. Algunos se reían. Otros seguían comiendo sus huevos y bebiendo

³² “With one ear I’m listening to what she’s saying, and with the other to the Café Quito regulars kidding the youths on the scaffolding, yelling remarks that are, I gather, part of some masculine initiation rite, supposedly affectionate but in fact foreshadowing a disaster that will engulf not only the pair of broad-brush painters . . . a disaster that will engulf not just the painters but the jeerers as well, the givers of advice, in other words: us” (*Amulet*, 123-4).

su café. Y el que había contado el primero, seguía. Decía, ¿por qué las mujeres no saben esquiar? Silencio. Pues porque en la cocina no nieva nunca. Algunos no lo entendía. La mayoría de los polis no había esquiado en su vida. ¿En dónde esquiar en medio del desierto? Pero algunas se reían. Y el contador de los chistes decía: a ver, valedores, defíname una mujer. Silencio. Y la respuesta: pues un conjunto de células medianamente organizada que rodean a una vagina.³³ (2666, 689-90)

Here, the joke telling occurs in a ritualized form itself. Levinson argues that the condition of representation is repetition, positing convention and ritual as the operative organizing principles. Bolaño's works, along with the doublings that are not quite doublings, the mirrorings that are not mere reflection, are important components to Levinson's observation.

For representation to represent more than its own self, that is, "re"present or "repeat" itself, and achieve another status than that of simulacra, it must *vary* on itself. Ritual, in its repetition *as* ritual, does insist on repeating itself. An important caveat is that, even in Catholicism's Stations of the Cross, ritual cannot in and of itself *repeat* the ritual exactly as it

³³ "At the same time of day, cops at the end of their shifts met for breakfast at Trejo's, a long coffee shop like a coffin, with few windows. There they drank coffee and ate huevos rancheros or eggs and bacon or scrambled eggs and they told jokes. Sometimes they were monographic, the jokes. And many of them were about women. For example, one cop would say what's the perfect woman? *Pues*, she's two feet tall so she comes right up to your waist, big ears so you can steer her, a flat head so you have a place to set your beer, no teeth so she can't bite your dick, and hideously ugly so no bastard steals her away. Some laughed. Others kept eating their eggs and drinking their coffee. And the teller of the first joke continued. He asked: why don't women know how to ski? Silence. *Pues* because it never snows in the kitchen. Some didn't get it. Most of the cops had never skied in their lives. Where do you ski in the middle of the desert? But some laughed. And the joke teller said: all right, friends, what's the definition of a woman? Silence. And the answer: *pues* a vagina surrounded by a more or less organized bunch of cells" (2666, 553).

was before. The actors, executors, and participants can change, and the time and date surely have. This is a requirement of the fundamental condition of repeatability and ritual. Looking inside the frame of ritual itself, within the “time of ritual”, this “time” itself is nonetheless complicated by the very suspension of time it commands. The time of ritual is the time *of ritual* itself. All other time suspended, ritualized performance suspends all other time for the time one is *in* ritual time itself. It is, moreover, an enactment of serialized violence like the serial killings suggested by the hunt for a serial killer (along with eventually copycat killers) responsible for the crimes against women occurring across “The Part About the Crimes”. Rather than *literal* serial killings, here serial killing is violence conceptualized. This is more than just “conceptual violence” in the form of psychological harm it could cause women hearing such jokes, or in terms of the men and emasculated viewpoint of women as lesser beings or beings for men’s use. It is conceptualized violence that serializes or, “ritualizes”, the (re)enactment of literal violence itself. It is a laughter that invites apathy, precisely because of the futility of fighting against.

Bolaño ends the section:

Algunos, en las mesas más distantes, refinaban sus huevos con chile o sus huevos con carne o sus huevos con frijoles en silencio o hablando entre ellos, de sus cosas, aislados del resto. Desayunaban, como si dijéramos, acodados en la angustia y la duda. Acodados en lo esencial que no lleva a ninguna parte. Ateridos de sueño: es decir de espaldas a las risas que propugnaban otro sueño. Por contra, acodados en los extremos de la barra, otros que bebían sin decir nada, no más

mirando el borlote, o murmurando qué jalada, o sin murmurar nada, simplemente fijando en la retina a los mordelones y a los judiciales.³⁴ (2666, 692)

Once “initiated” through the ritual act of violence the morning after the jokes about women at *Trejo*’s, after the half hour the shit-kicking lasted, leaving a cloud of yellow dust behind them, Lalo Cura is required to speak of his coat of arms.³⁵ Here, the ritual of shit-kicking in which he participated advances to the next ritual stage.

Those that object, notably, are written off in deference to God. God, here, is the ultimate chauvinist. This maneuver on the part of the joke-teller himself is part of the requirement of religious ritual—appeal to a higher being. Yet here the mightiness of God is both undercut *and* sustained by the reference to God as the ultimate chauvinist. What is sanctified here, is the ritual violence to follow, and the ritualization of violence itself as a way of life and account for the “way things are”. This indictment, moreover, appeals to the requirements of ritual. Following the serial misogynist joking, the cops present head out to a beating:

La mañana de los chistes de mujeres, por ejemplo, cuando González y su compañero, el patrullero Juan Rubio, abandonaban el *Trejo*’s, Lalo Cura los estaban esperando. Y cuando González y su compañero quisieron deshacerse de Lalo Cura, de un rincón salió Epifanio y les dijo que mejor le hicieran caso al

³⁴ “Some, at the farthest tables, polished off their eggs with chile or their eggs with meat and their eggs with beans in silence or talked amongst themselves, about their own business, separate from the others. They ate, it might be said, hunched over in anguish and doubt. Hunched over in contemplation of essential questions, which doesn’t get you anywhere. Numb with sleep, in other words with their backs turned to the laughter that invited a different kind of sleep. Meanwhile, leaning at the ends of the bar, others drank without a word, just watching the commition, or murmuring what a load of shit, or not murmuring a thing, simply taking a mental snapshot of the crooked cops and inspectors” (2666, 553).

³⁵ 2666, 554

chavo. Según el patrullero Juan Rubio habían trabajado todo el turno de noche y estaban cansados y Epifanio era mucho Epifanio como para llavarle la contraria. Esta clase de evento gustaban tanto en la policía de Santa Teresa como los chistes de mujeres. En realidad, muchísimo más. Los dos coches enfilaron hacia un sitio discreto. A poca velocidad. Total, qué prisa había por partirse de la madre.³⁶

(2666, 692)

Lalo Cura is the nickname for “Olegario Cura Expósito”. “So what do your friends call you? . . . Lalo Cura? asked the police chief. . . Did you hear that, Epifanio? Asked the police chief. Sure, I heard, said Epifanio. His name is Lalo Cura, said the police chief, and he started to laugh. *La locura* [madness], lunacy, get it? Of course I get it, said Epifanio, and he started to laugh too. Soon the three of them were laughing” (2666, 386). He is a young man (born 1976) hired out of Villaviciosa by Santa Teresa police chief Pedro Negrete (and twin brother of University of Santa Teresa rector Pablo Negrete) on behalf of his old friend, *narcotraficante* Pedro Rengifo. The madness that is “Madness” or “Lunacy” himself, is laughable and the very apex of further bonding and group cohesion in an ambiance of malignant madness. Both lunacy and laughter are contagious.

³⁶ “The morning of the jokes about women, for example, when González and his partner, patrolman Juan Rubio, left Trejo’s, Lalo Cura was waiting for them. And when González and his partner tried to shake him off, Epifanio emerged from a corner and said they’d better listen to the kid. According to Juan Rubio they’d been working the night shift and they were tired and who was Epifanio to tell them what to do. This kind of event was as popular among Santa Teresa cops as jokes about women. Even more so, in fact. The two cars drove off to a secluded spot. Slowly. After all, why hurry to a shit kicking” (554).

That Pedro Rengifo is a *narcotraficante* is not explicit at the time of Lalo Cura's hiring. While not outside the realm of suspicion, the information is not divulged until page four hundred and sixty three by police officer Epifanio Galindo in a conversation with Cura himself. "What do you think it is? He [Galindo] asked. An address book, said Lalo Cura. No, said Epifanio, its an unsolved case. This happened before you came to Santa Teresa [1993] . . . months before you got here . . . A reporter was killed. Her name was Isabel Urrea. . . I was there when they searched her house to see if they could find some clue" the conversation proceeds. Amongst the items found, is indeed an address book representing here, for Galindo, the unsolved case. In it Galindo "found the phone numbers of three *narcos*. One of them was Pedro Rengifo" he clarifies (2666, 463). That Lalo selected from a group temporarily hired as body guard for Pedro Rengifo's wife- Following the ritual of shit-kicking common, and being deemed worthy of the rites to enter the police brotherhood by having saved the police chief's wife, Lalo Cura's initiation is not yet complete. Here, he is asked to reveal his "Coat of Arms". The initiation advances from initial circumscription of masculine privilege via misogynist jokes, to vigilante inter-cop justice in the form of a beating, to the requirement Lalo Cura divulge background information on his life. Through these stages Lalo Cura fully becomes "one of them" and enters the brotherhood of, mostly, twisted cops as is the case in 2666, part of the "polis" of "*polis* [police]". "Háblame de su geneología, decían los cabrones. Enuméreme su árbol genealógico, decían los valedores. Bueyes mamones de su propia verga. Lalo Cura no se encorajinaba. Volteados hijos de su chingada madre. Háblame de su escudo de armas. Ya estuvo suave. Va a toser Pedrito. Pero sin encorajinarse. Respetando el uniforme. Sin abrirse ni sacarle al parche, pero con cara de no hay

fijón” (2666, 693).³⁷ It is then the reader learns of Lalo Cura’s family history, though it remains ambiguous whether the police officers present (this too is vague—exactly *who* among the officers is present) actually hear his tale too, Bolaño continuing the above narration with, *Algunas noches, en la penumbra del vecindario, cuando dejaba los libros de criminología (no se me frunza ahora, buey), mareado con tantas huellas dactilares, manchas de sangre y semen . . . semidormido, varado entre el sueño y la vigilia, escuchaba o recordaba voces que le hablaban de la primera de su familia, el árbol genológico que se remontaba hasta 1865”* (2666, 693).³⁸

Returning to The Part About Archimboldi, ritualized violence is also linked to covenant and not such self-divulgence, but to actual confession even more heavily. Abraham Ansky and his wife, like the Abraham and Sarah of the Pentateuch, bear a child in old age and are filled with happiness. Abraham Ansky, like Abraham in the Pentateuch, also fathers laughter. The difference is that while Abraham of the Pentateuch literally *fathered* laughter, Abraham Ansky merely fathers laughter by giving birth to it in others. The point here rests its case in Isaac’s, the son of Abraham and Sarah, is conceived not just in conjunction with laughter and his birth, but is literally, unlike Boris Abramovich Ansky of Abraham Ansky and his wife (who remains unnamed), *named* laughter. Isaac literally *means* “he laughs”.³⁹ God specifically designated Isaac, not his half-brother Ishmael born of Abraham and Sarah’s handmaiden, the Egyptian

³⁷ “Talk to me about your family history, said the bastards. Explain your family tree, the assholes said. Self-sucking pieces of shit. Lalo Cura didn’t get angry. Faggot sons of bitches. Tell me about your coat of arms. That’s enough now. The kids going to blow. Stay calm. Respect the uniform. Don’t show you’re scared or back down, don’t let them think they’re getting to you” (2666, 554).

³⁸ “Some nights, in dim light of the tenement, when he was done with the books on criminology (don’t lose it now, man), dizzy from all the fingerprints, blood and semen stains . . . drifting between sleep and wakefulness, he heard or remembered voices talking to him about the first Expósito, the family tree, dating back to 1850” (2666, 554).

³⁹ *The Ryrie Study Bible*, note on Gen 17:19.

Hagar, as heir of the covenant.⁴⁰ Bolaño narrates, “Sólo tuvieron [Abraham Ansky y su esposa] un hijo, Borís, ya a avanzada edad, como el Abraham y la Sara bíblicos, algo que les llenó de alegría” (2666, 885).⁴¹

The scenes of laughter that surround the birth of Isaac in the Pentateuch and Boris in Bolaño’s 2666, may be compared. The passage occurs as such in part five of 2666:

And when Abram was ninety nine years old and nine, the Lord appeared to Abram, and said unto him, I *am* the Almighty God; walk before me, and be thou perfect. And I will make a covenant between me and thee, and will multiply thee exceedingly. And Abram fell on his face: and God talked with him, saying ‘As for me, behold, my covenant *is* with thee, and thou shalt be a father of many nations. Neither shall thy name any more be called Abram, but thy name shall be called Abraham; for a father of many nations have I made thee. . . . And God said unto Abraham, As far as Sar’ ai thy wife, thou shalt not call her name Sarai, but Sarah *shall* her name *be*. And I will bless her, and give thee a son also of her: yea, I will bless her, and she shall be *a mother* of nations; kings people shall be of her. Then Abraham fell upon his face, and laughed, and said in his heart, Shall a *child* be born until him that is an hundred years old? And shall Sarah, that is ninety years old, bear? (Gen 17: 1-17)

⁴⁰ *The Ryrie Study Bible*, note on Gen 17:19.

⁴¹ “They [Abraham Ansky and his wife] had just one son, Boris, when they were already approaching old age, like the biblical Abraham and Sarah, which filled them with happiness” (2666, 708).

Abra(ha)m is the first figure of the Pentateuch (and thus the Torah *and* Bible) to laugh. Being told he is to sire a child at ninety nine by God when his wife is ninety herself and so far barren, Abraham laughs. Understandable. Being the barren ninety year old woman who will live another thirty seven years hence, Sara('ai)/h is the second to laugh. Also understandable. Knowing little of age ninety at age thirty myself, I can only imagine laughter or tears as a response, and as much joy and sheer terror, or at least anxiety. Not even barren, most women are far past menarche that age, almost double in years to it. Abra(ha)m and Sara('ai)/h both laugh here understandably *and* appropriately. Abraham laughs outwardly, but says in his heart "Shall a *child* be born until him that is an hundred years old?" (Gen 17:19).

What remains is the difference between their laughter, and God's response in the Pentateuch to both. Sara('ai)/h, in contradistinction, laughs inwardly.

And he [God] said, I will certainly return unto thee according to the time of life; and, lo, Sarah thy wife shall have a son. And Sarah heard *it* in the tent door, which *was* behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old *and* well stricken in age; *and* it ceased to be with Sarah after the way with women. Therefore Sarah laughed within herself, saying, After I am waxed old shall I have pleasure, my lord, of being old also? And the Lord said unto Abraham, Wherefore did Sarah laugh, saying, Shall I of a surety bear a child, which am old? Is anything too hard for the Lord? At the time appointed I will return unto thee, according to the time of life, and Sarah shall have a son. Then Sarah denied, saying, I laughed not; for she was afraid. And he [God] said, Nay; but thou didst laugh. (Gen. 18: 10-15)

The reasons for Abra(ha)m and Sara('ai)/h's laughter rest upon incredulity and preposterousness. It is footnoted in *The Ryrie Study Bible* "Some feel that Abraham *laughed* for joy, but verse 18 indicates it was an expression of doubt as he struggled to match his faith to his circumstances" (note on Gen 17:17). This is not entirely separate from Abraham Anksy's struggles as expressed in his own joke-making and the laughter of others, and his (in)ability to reconcile his circumstances with the worlds and global war. But, as far as the occurrence of joyous laughter:

For Sarah conceived, and bare him a son in his old age, at the time set of which God had spoken to him. And Abraham called the name of his son that was born unto him, whom Sarah bare to him, Isaac. And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac being eight days old, when his son Isaac was born unto him. And Sarah said, God hath made me to laugh, *so that* all that hear will laugh with me. And she said, Who would have said unto Abraham, that Sarah should give children suck? for I have born *him* a son in his old age. And the child grew, and was weaned: and Abraham made a great feast the *same* day that Isaac was weaned. (Gen. 21:2-8)

As the note on Gen 21:6 in *The Ryrie Study Bible* indicates, *this* is the laughter of rejoicing. Where Abraham laughs from doubt and Sarah from fear, but both at the seeming absurdity of the suggestion from God they will bear children at such an age, only for Sarah to then give birth to "He Laughs"/laughter *and* have joyous laughter born within her. It is not then trivial either that laughable, *literally*, a synonym of preposterous. The first and only joke-teller to propagate laughter outright in 2666, is Abraham Ansky. So it is with the Pentateuch, save the appellation Ansky. Father to Boris Abramovich Ansky, Boris is born while Abraham Ansky and his wife approach old age. While the laughter of Abraham and Sarah is already flagged as not being joyous at first, there it laughter to come that will be in the Pentateuch.

V. OPENLY LAUGHING

If the reader is to play detective, locating the “weak spots” in Bolaño, the “penetrable” spots arise in simile itself. Simile here troping off of *comparability* of Abraham Ansky, his wife, their situation, and the Abraham and Sarah of the Pentateuch, the simile cannot be entirely completed or made. Succeeding at the level of name, age, and fulfillment of happiness, the simile remains superficial. It can be rendered at the level of laughter as well, if laughter, however, is fully readable at all, which remains doubtful.⁴²

It is once his child is already born that Abraham Ansky will inspire the birth of laughter in others. There is already a problematic gap, however. Sarah’s laugh is born within her and Abraham as with Abraham Ansky can, at best as is the biological case with men, only implant the seed of laughter in another/others. That seed, for Abraham Ansky, is implanted *in others* via *his* joke making. Ansky’s wife does not give birth to laughter as is the case with Isaac (he laughs). He instead incites laughter in a crowd of his Jewish community. Bolaño narrates, “En Abraham Ansky se reunía con sus amigos, solía bromear a respect y decía ocasiones, cuando Abraham Ansky se reunía con sus amigos, solía bromear al respect y decía, hablando de lo consentido que era su hijo, que a veces pensaba que hubiera debido sacrificado cuando aún era pequeño. Los ortodoxos de la aldea se escandalizaban o hacían como que se escandalisaban y los demás se reían abiertamente” (2666, 885).⁴³ The suggestion is provocative. Sarah taking divine message for joking, Abraham Ansky makes the birth of Boris a situation worth joking about.

⁴² Jean Luc-Nancy, 720.

⁴³ “Sometimes, when Abraham Ansky saw his friends, he would joke about it, saying his son was so spoiled that every so often he thought the boy should have been sacrificed when he was little. The village’s Orthodox Jews were scandalized or pretended to be scandalized and the others laughed openly” (2666, 708).

Isaac not yet born, Boris already has been. The risible here differentiates, yet arises proportionate to, it's very laughability. What is preposterous here, for Ansky, is the mere insufficiency of the world conditions for Abraham to sire a child that could make Ansky the father of many nations. Boris, Born in 1909 in Koteskino, Ukraine in the same house Reiter will occupy following a wound sustained to his neck in the Soviet Union town of Sebastopol, Boris' parents are Jewish and make a living selling shirts. His mother additionally raised chickens and sold eggs but, as the reader is told, "[Ellos] no necesitaban comprar verduras pues poseían un huerto pequeño muy bien aprovechada" (2666, 885).⁴⁴ While it is possible Boris was spoiled with love, attention, and within the means his parents were able, Boris's birth is not on the condition of a covenant with God as with Isaac, and the inception of World War I five years hence from Boris's birth suggest an ambiance of much bleaker prospects for Boris's proliferation. He will, in fact, as the reader learns through Reiter's encounter with Boris's manuscript of Boris's hidden in the chimney of the house in which he now occupies and Boris once did, ultimately join the Red Army and settle in Moscow where he will dedicate himself fully to literature. It is in fact in this manuscript that Archimboldi will encounter the name of the Italian painter Benno von Archimboldi that will later become his pseudonym, as "fate" would have it. This is the same Italian painter Pelletier's professor mentions on the first page of 2666, to Pelletier's disappointment as it brings him no closer, as he had hoped the familiar sounding name to his professor, would to the author of *D'Arsonval*—our Hans Reiter/Benno von Archimboldi of part five.

Furthermore, in a post-national milieu, the place for nationalism as foundational identity is superseded. Implanted instead is the import of supranational identities and entities on a

⁴⁴ "[They] didn't need to buy vegetables because they [Ansky and his wife] kept a garden, small but well tended" (2666, 708).

globalized scale over the national identity itself. The construct of a nationalized world or the propagation of further nations is diminished, global war and fragmentation of the national subject taking precedence. In Bolaño, a certain the “S/state of Violence” instead reigns, and subjects within it will cross borders, but horror spreading like a contagion as blows over borders like the wind, needing no passport to do so, and violence seeping over them just as much as liquid across paper. Madness has become a contagion, and its insipidity and malignancy come before the capacity of artificially drawn borders to contain. Thus it is in his own futility, Boris would have been better off spared, there being no world to “spoil” him with, no nations with which he will be promised riches or legacy, and a hen sacrificed in both his place and that of the ram in the Pentateuch’s account of the Binding of Isaac.

The slating in preposterousness and skepticism of this foundational passage of laughter and joking retains a feature common in Bolaño’s works, that literature and literary reference only signify to the extent they do not really or, rather, “fully” signify.⁴⁵ They, instead, resonate and refract. For the son of Abraham Ansky, there will be no such feast. There will also be no “sacrifice” or covenant as occurs in the Binding of Isaac, but there will, however, be a sacrifice that occurs instead literally in its place. When told to sacrifice his son, Abraham obeys and is halted from slaying his son, God satisfied with Abraham’s fidelity and faith but most importantly, his fear of God. God satisfied by Abraham’s stretching forth his hand, once Isaac is bound atop Mount Mori’ah, and taking the knife upward to slay his son, God stops Abraham before the act’s fruition. Abraham then instead grabs up a nearby ram God’s provided and sacrifices the ram in Isaac’s stead.

⁴⁵ Gareth Williams, “Sovereignty and Melancholic Paralysis”, 131.

The ram offered as a substitute for Isaac in the Pentateuch illustrates the substitutionary sacrifice of the Lamb of God, i.e. Isaac himself. But for Ansky, there will be no such “sacrifice”. While this establishes the most direct and directly discernable relationship between a joke—someone “joking”—and audience response of laughter, it is not isolatable as pure anomaly. There is what follows. Ansky moves forward into a more ambiguous register. Laughter already provoked, Ansky proceeds, “pero en vez de sacrificarlo a él sacrificué una gallina! ¡Una gallina!, una gallina! ¡No un cordero ni a mi primogénito sino una gallina!, ¡la gallina de los huevos de oro!” (2666, 885). Instead of sacrificing laughter, he sacrifices the hen that lays golden eggs or, as the translation here into English doesn’t permit or complete, the hen with golden testicles—de “los huevos de oro”.⁴⁶ Laughter already provoked, the continuation forward in the joke permits the continuation forward or “switch” into a more serious register. The joke itself is one of self-deprecation. What bears importance here is not the anomaly of Ansky’s joke and the directness of its relationship to provocation or laughter, but the ultimate unbinding of its relationship to the serious. Laughter, this anomaly affirms, is bound to its condition of revelation in Bolaño’s 2666. “But instead of sacrificing him I sacrificed a hen” (Bolaño 706)! Not just any hen, but “*the* hen”—“the hen that lays golden eggs” (Bolaño 706)! Recalling Aesop’s fables, this literary reference emits a public act of personal indictment. Application of existing theories of laughter reveals the underlying structure of how this joke functions. Superiority theory here supports the joke as a victory one over oneself. This act of self-disparagement is not explicitly counted for in comic theories dependent on or party involving superiority as a foundational construct of humor production. But it is, ultimately, an act of self-belittlement, a release of tension offered as a

⁴⁶ “[B]ut instead of sacrificing him I sacrificed a hen! a hen! a hen! not a sheep or my firstborn but a hen! the hen that lays golden eggs!” (2666, 708).

victory over oneself and laughter afforded by the futility which it suggests in struggling against oneself or ones conditions in a world about to break out in globalized war, and one in which eventually, Boris will be persecuted by Stalin, the narration in Bolaño on Ansky ending when Poland is invaded by the Nazi army.

To close, it is necessary to return once more to Sarah and Abraham, this time at the level of mocking. On the day of the feasting in celebration of Isaac's final weaning, Sarah is perturbed by what she witnesses of Abraham and Hagar's son Ishmael in the face of Isaac. The passage reads:

And Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, which she had born unto Abraham, mocking. Wherefore she said unto Abraham, Cast out this bond-woman and her son: for the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son, *even* with Isaac. And the thing was very grievous in Abraham's sight because of his son. And God said unto Abraham, Let it not be grievous in thy sight because of the lad, and because of thy bondwoman; in all that Sarah hath said unto thee, hearken unto her voice, for in Isaac thy seed that be called. (Gen. 21:9-12).

The Ryrie Study Bible's note on mocking here, notes that "mocking" or "playing with" (the Hebrew word is ambiguous) is from the same Hebrew root. Sarah sees Isaac's half-brother Ishmael mocking Isaac the day of feasting during which Abraham and Sarah celebrate the weaning of Isaac. This is the cause of Sarah's request to expel Ishmael and his mother Hagar, Abraham agreeing once God upholds his end of the original covenant—that God will make a nation of the son Ishmael yet and, additionally, *nations* will derive from Isaac. Mocking, it would seem, would bear a direct relationship to violence and atrocity. It does. Only in the case of

Bolaño and *2666*, laughter is all the more so in direct relation to violence. Boris, in *2666*, also bears witness to mocking in a passage not much further ahead narratively as that of Ishmael's mocking Isaac in the Pentateuch.

A los catorce años Boris Ansky se alistó en el ejército rojo. La despedida de sus padres fue conmovedora. Primero se puso a llorar desconsoladamente el padre, luego la madre y finalmente Borís se lanzó a sus brazos y también se puso a llorar. El viaje hasta Moscú era inolvidable. En el camino vio rostros increíbles que anunciaban el principio del paraíso, y todo lo que encontró, ya fuera caminando o en tren, lo afectó vivamente pues aquella era la primera vez que salía de su aldea, si se exceptúan dos viajes en los que acompañó a su padre vendiendo blusas por la comarca. En Moscú se dirigió a una oficina de reclutamiento . . . Y entonces un soldado viejo que fumaba en pipa le preguntó si era judío. Y Ansky dijo que sí, que era judío, y miró al Viejo soldado a los ojos y sólo entonces se dio cuenta de que era tuerto y además le faltaba un brazo. . . Luego el tuerto se removió, se tapó con una manta hasta el codo y dijo: nuestro comandante se llamaba Korolenko y también murió aquel mismo día. Entonces, a una velocidad supersónica, Ansky imaginó a Verbitsky y a Korlenko, vio a Korolenko burlándose de Vernitsky, escuchó las palabras que Korolenko decía a espaldas de Verbitsky, entró en los pensamientos nocturnos de Verbitsky, en los deseos de Korolenko, en las vagas y cambiantes esperanzas de ambos, en sus convicciones y en sus cabalgatas, en los bosques que dejaban atrás y en las

tierras inundadas que cruzaban, en los ruidos de las noches al raso y en las conversaciones ininteligibles de los soldados por las mañanas, antes de volver a montar. Vio aldeas y tierras de labranza, vio Iglesias y humaredas inciertas que se levantaban en el horizonte, hasta llegar al día perfectamente gris, totalmente gris, absolutamente gris, como si una nube de mil kilómetros de largo hubiera pasado por aquellas tierras, sin detenerse, interminable.⁴⁷ (2666, 886)

VII. STEPPING INTO THE ABYSS, FINAL PAUSE

As for mockery, mockery is a futility as much as struggles against violence and to end its mad contagiousness, and the contagion of madness, as laughter is propagator of violence.

William Blake's poem *Mock on, Mock on, Voltaire, Rousseau*, begins:

⁴⁷ At fourteen Boris enlisted in the Red Army. His goodbyes were heartbreaking. First his father began to weep inconsolably, then his mother, and finally Boris threw himself into their arms and wept too. The trip to Moscow was unforgettable. Along the way he saw incredible faces, heard incredible conversations and speeches, read incredible proclamations on the walls that announced the paradise at hand, and everything he came upon, whether on foot or on the train, affected him deeply because this was the first time he'd left his village, with the exception of two trips he'd taken with his father to sell shirts in the region. . . In Moscow he visited a recruitment office. . . And then an old soldier who was smoking a pipe asked him his name and whether he was Jewish, And Ansky said yes, he was Jewish, and he looked the old soldier in the face and only then did he notice that he was missing an eye, and also an arm. . . Then the one-eyed man shifted in his chair, pulled a blanket up to his chin, and said: our commander's name was Korolenko and he died the same day [as a Jewish comrade, Dmitri Verbitsky, of the one-eyed soldier did fifty miles from Warsaw]. Then, at supersonic speed, Ansky imagined Verbitsky and Korolenko, he saw Korolenko mocking Verbitsky, heard what Korolenko said behind Verbitsky's back, entered into Verbitsky's night thoughts, Korolenko's desires, into each man's vague and shifting dreams, into their convictions and their rides on horseback, the forests they left behind, the sounds of night in the open. . . He saw villages and farmland, he saw churches and hazy clouds of smoke rising on the horizon, until he came to the day when they both died, Verbitsky and Korolenko, a perfectly gray day, utterly gray, as if a thousand-mile long cloud had passed over the land without stopping, endless. (2666, 708-9)

Mock on, mock on, Voltaire, Rousseau!

Mock on mock on; 'tis all in vain!

You throw the sand against the wind,

And the wind throws it back again.

In this poem of Blake, William Blake, mocking is considered useless. It is inutile in the sense it will never affect anybody or anything, it as inutile as throwing sand against the wind and the sand being blown right back to where it was first thrown. This is regardless of whomsoever throws the sand, realizes the futility of their derision or not.

Laughter is not redemptive in Bolaño. Generally, it is derisive. The laughter that echoes forth from the cavern thrusts forward at the rate and with the force of a wrecking ball. It is, as noted, a demolition job. Even when acting as a coping mechanism, it is generally done so in the face of what's already ruinous or in ruins. Mocking is like throwing wind in the sand. But laughter is like the wind that blows its sharp granulates back in your eyes. Insofar as Bolaño serves as a new kind of literary figuration as far as Villalobos-Ruminott is concerned, laughter itself is figured anew within it. Violence occurs, recurs, and repeats. Laughter does not merely mirror, but refracts the literal violence of a horrific world, a prism through which the light that would exist in the face of atrocity gives no hope, but only instead distorts.

No one can be more or less dead, congress woman Azucena Esquivel Plata suggests, in response to her hired detectives question whether or not he believes her childhood friend Kelly Rivera Parker to be dead. The detective tells Esquivel Plata he doesn't want to see her waste her time or money on his services further. She responds:

¿Quiere decir que cree que Kelly está muerta?, le grité. Más o menos, dijo sin perder un ápice de compostura. ¿Cómo que más o menos?, grité. ¡O se está muerto o no se está muerto, chingados! En México uno puede estar más o menos muerto, me contestó muy seriamente. Lo miré con ganas de abofetearlo. Qué tipo tan frío y reservado era ése. No, le dije casi silabeando, ni en México ni en ninguna otra parte del mundo alguien puede estar más o menos muerto. . . Estoy harta de los mexicanos que hablan y se comparan como si todo esto fuera *Pedro Páramo*, dije.⁴⁸ (2666, 779-80)

No one can be more or less dead in Mexico or anywhere else, but anyone and everyone sure can already be halfway to dead and, ultimately, hell-bound and thrust toward the mouth of the abyss that shall swallow us all, be it old age, hepatic failure, or torture accomplice to murder. This, then, is what it means to laugh, and to laugh from the depth of one's dark gut, for Bolaño and as figured in 2666. God save the Queen. Because surely, no one else can.

⁴⁸ “Do you mean you think Kelly is dead? I [Azucena] shouted. More or less, he said without losing his composure in the slightest. What do you mean, more or less? I shouted. For fuck's sake, you're either dead or you're not! In Mexico a person can be more or less dead, he answered very seriously. I [Azucena] stared at him, wanting to hit him. . . What a cold, detached man he was. No, I said, almost hissing, no one can be more or less dead, in Mexico or anywhere else in the world. . . I'm sick of Mexicans who all talk and act like this is *Pedro Páramo*” (2666, 624).

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