Notes on Roberto Bolaño, *By Night in Chile*

(The essays I am posting on Humanities Commons are also on Librarything and Goodreads. These aren't reviews. They are thoughts about the state of literary fiction, intended principally for writers and critics involved in seeing where literature might be able to go. Each one uses a book as an example of some current problem in writing. The context is my own writing project, described here, theorized here. All comments and criticism are welcome!)

A Different Model of How to Attach Politics to Literature and
What it Means to Write a Novel After Novels Have Ended

1. A Different Model of How to Attach Politics to Literature

Like others of Bolano's books, Night in Chile is a concerted fusion of two worlds: the society of writers and poets (their parties, their conversations, their lifestyles), and the society of political control (in this case Pinochet's generals and his repressive regime). The narrator in Night in Chile is haunted by his complicity: he actually tutored Pinochet in Marx, and he went to parties at houses in which, as he later learned, people were being tortured and killed.

What's interesting here, for me, is how easy it is to imagine either of these by itself. Bolano is always full of anecdotes about writers--this novel could have been a memoir--and he can fill literally hundreds of pages with the names of Latin American writers and poets. In this novel there are just two scenes in which politics intersects the narrator's life, but they're enough to suggest a separate novel--a thriller--in which the narrator is not a writer, but still has the same experiences.

This is not the most common way to put politics into fiction, and it feels at once utterly committed and wholly artificial. As if the commitment to write was a promise to write politics and literature, but the impetus to write was to immerse readers in the author's literary world.

2. What it Means to Write a Novel After Novels Have Ended

Bolano's books are written in continuous narratives streams, which change direction unexpectedly. His stories are capacious enough to welcome any number of inclusions, asides, and diversions. Sometimes complete short stories are embedded in narratives; other times stories break off suddenly, as if the narrator forgot them or the author hadn't decided where they might go. *By Night in Chile* is 130 pages long and has only two paragraphs, one of which is a single line. *2666* has several novellas, some page-long stories, some series and sequences, and a
number of repeated motifs, and yet it doesn't have a comprehensible overall structure like, say, Ulysses or even Gravity's Rainbow. I'm aware of four explanations for this:

1. Some people who praise Bolano tend to say that his intentionally collagist narratives are designed that way to match his subjects. Discursive, wandering, associative writing, so the argument goes, is artful, and is only designed to appear improvised or insouciant about form. I'm not convinced of that (as I wrote about "2666" on Goodreads).

2. There is another argument that Bolano's books best imagined as counterfeits of stream of consciousness, but again this seems insufficient: not just because not all his narratives represent people thinking or speaking, but because his novels all have plots, with beginnings, endings, discrete episodes, flashbacks, and all the apparatus of fiction.

3. A third argument, especially in relation to 2666, is that the book was finished in haste. That may be partly true, but it would not explain Bolano's other books.

4. I'd like to try to articulate another kind of explanation. Here's how I ended a brief review of "Amulet" on Goodreads:

The authorial voice, and in this case also the narrator's voice, are presented as if they are talking. It's as if this is what happens in a writer's mind when he or she is contemplating the craft and social world of novel writing, before it's time to settle down and write. This would explain an odd effect in Bolano: when you encounter a passage that is beautifully written, it seems somehow out of place, as if it's something that should only happen in the novels that Bolano's characters are forever discussing. Or to put it another way: it is as if novel writing is no longer possible, and the only way forward for the novel is rumination about the novel.

(The full context here is here.)

My review sparked a short but interesting discussion about Bolano's style. A reader named Milo commented "I like to think of Bolano's work as a kind of fulfillment of what Borges talks about in one of his introductions: 'the madness of composing vast books, of setting out in 500 pages an idea that can be perfectly related orally in five minutes. The better way to go about it is to pretend that those books already exist, and offer a summary, a commentary on them.'"

I like the idea that Bolano's fiction is extended commentary on fiction -- which, in the telling, often comes so close to the fiction itself that it's indistinguishable, because a rehearsal has to be as close to the performance as possible. For me this goes with the idea that Bolano writes with an imagined speaking voice, not a writing voice: it's a monologue, sometimes inner, sometimes as if spoken, about literature.
But then comes a difficult point. I still think 2666 and other fictions are loosely assembled. Am I to accept all such looseness as an effect of the rehearsal, or of the speaking voice? At what point can I hold the author accountable for the form of the book? How can I not find myself thinking: is every sudden transition or overly long passage or unnoticed resonance expressive? Aren't there passages that could benefit from closer attention, even in an author who writes as he speaks, and thinks as he writes? Or, on the other hand: aren't there passages where a writerly style, apparently produced without the idea of transcribing thought or speech, feels obtrusive?

This is by way of saying Bolano's prose is very much like a representation of thinking about writing, or pondering writing about novels and poetry. There is a tension, never acknowledged but always present, between the structured narratives that provide the novels' framework, and the wandering thoughts of the narrators. It wasn't possible for Bolano to write about this in the novels, because they are examples of what happens when a person cannot (will not) produce the narrative itself, but only the idea of it.