

El Misterio Nadal: Purportedly Compiled and with Introduction in 2001 by Roberto Bolaño. Edited by Isabel Quiroga and Jorge Mosconi. Translated by A.B Spuytin Duyvil Press

Reviewed by Étienne D'Abattoir

I cannot but read this splendid rescued (reconstructed?) book--perhaps a roman á clef--putatively introduced by Bolaño, without thinking of Ricardo Piglia's recension of a quote from André Gide speaking of his novel *Les Faux Monnayeurs*, within Piglia's apocryphal novel *La historia de un asesino inmune*:

Le style des Faux-Monnayeurs ne doit présenter aucun intérêt de surface, aucune saillie. Tout doit être dit de la manière la plus plate, celle qui fera dire à certains jongleurs : que trouvez-vous à admirer là-dedans ?

When I struggled with this issue with my novel *L'Horloge Redondante*, I first adopted a version of Nabokov and Beckett's solution, translating the manuscript into various languages, to no good effect, as I tried to recreate the tedium at the heart of my novel, only to find it becoming more and more interesting the more I passed from French to Spanish to English to (competent) Russian to (passable) German to (abominable) Farsi. It was then I had to accept my fate as an excellent stylist, with all the attendant prejudices and snobbery implied therein. Or, in words taken from those benighted pages,

Chaque fois que le carillon sonnait, je fus piégé dans sa resonance, stupéfait á quel point le passage de douze á douze, de minuit á minuit, était facile.

Bolaño became relevant to my life circa 2005, when I taught seminars to wickedly talented Latin American young writers, self-displaced in Avignon, not so much in exile as waiting out the year to see what happened next. Yet we were at odds over Bolaño, whose work had burst onto the scene posthumously, making him their writer of choice. My favorite student, a male sylph with an unwarranted confidence, bought me a copy of *Los Detectives Salvajes*. I found its descriptions of bar life, fucking, and wandering, desultory and third-order, and the dialogue pretentiously uninspired. I then tried 2666. Worse. It almost made me stop writing, so much did I abhor it. The constant name-dropping of philosophers was a substitute for actual thought. The anti-intellectualism felt lazy and warmed over. My range of literary and analytic reference was annulled by this situation. I argued with my students that this lowering of the bar was characteristic of them, to whom I had tried with mixed success to teach the work of Levi-Strauss, Paz, and Heidegger. They seemed not to value anything from more than half a generation before their own time, or further away than the end of the hall where the drinking fountain sat. The Boom had left them with a bad taste in their mouths; they needed to slay the father; they didn't want to write epics. They wanted to write small, domestic, mindless stories, in an apolitical manner. There were no odysseys, only rambles.

As I returned to my writing desk one night, discouraged, staring at the blank screen, I recalled the words of the under-appreciated A.J. Ayer:

By following our accepted standards of proof we sometimes arrive at beliefs which turn out to be false.

So I tried again. I stopped looking for adornments, architecture, polyvalence, and incisive insights. The most I could keep down was *Estrella distante*, in part because of its modesty of length. My students graduated and I also moved on. Then I began to watch, with alarm, a proliferation of posthumous works by Bolaño, as the adulation of his work surpassed the ecstasy formerly reserved for the brilliant, elegant, modest Borges. Was Bolaño in the pantheon? Would his reputation outlast that of Cortázar? Would his relatively shapeless books, diaries, essays be compared favorably with those of the ruthlessly organized Vargas Llosa? Or was this only an affair of the heart, with premature death crystallizing its splendor?

Then, into my hands came the volume that is the subject of this discourse, and at its center, Vladimir Nadal. It arrived, unbidden, anonymously sent, and out of its pages slipped a letter dated November 1, 2018. It was addressed to Nicolas Moguevsky, and recounted the letter-writer's experience "hanging out" (as the Americans say), in Barrio Palermo, where I once also spent several pleasant afternoons. It was simply signed "Kent." I assumed that it was from the infamous book-giving, petard-hurling, hoax-perpetrating imp Kent Johnson, whose reputation for pranks (and let it be said, literary generosity) exceeds that of Leopoldo Lugones, who once got a rarely tipsy Borges to wade in a fountain in Garibaldi Square at midnight, having convinced him that it was the Fountain of Youth.

No matter. This book gave me unexpected hope that the younger generation was not entirely wrong in its objects of adoration, to the extent I began a series of literary travesties of Li Shang Yin's poetry, in a newly profane spirit.

You ask how long before I come. Talk about pressure.

The night rains on Mount Pa swell the autumn pool.

I think you know what that means. Trim a candle at the West window,

As the lash of water on the pane makes me thirsty for a beer.

El mistero Nadal gives me (false?) hope as Nadal gets situated against an entertaining rogue's gallery, not the least Benjamin Péret. Again, Gide's novel:

Je sens en moi, confusément, des aspirations extraordinaires, des sortes de lames de fond, des mouvements, des agitations incompréhensibles, et que je ne veux pas chercher à comprendre, que je ne veux même pas observer, par crainte de les empêcher de se produire.

Bolaño kicks off the book with becoming nonchalance, remembering the impressive drinking prowess of this mere acquaintance. *He drank three grappas, fairly fast; in that respect, he fit my faint memory, though if I'd seen him on the street I wouldn't have recognized him.* Literary palaver follows in a bar. *Where the fuck did you hear about my next book?* And they reminisce about imagined harmless pranks such as kidnapping Octavio Paz. I wish they had, if only to test whether Paz had the *huevos* to have them both assassinated later, thus proving his *hombría mexicana*. Thus, the *Infras* would truly have passed into history. For as

we know, Latin America is the pinnacle of martyrdom. However, only Benjamin Péret, my countryman, was decisive enough to throw a drink on Paz. *Vive la France!* To his eternal credit, Nadal did break the arm of a strategically-placed street punk, while Bolaño gave the other a roundhouse.

Bolaño's introduction to Péret sets the stage for letters, poems and essays that seem to put every significant "counter" writer of Latin America on crossing paths, some of which lead to Soviet Russia, Europe and America. One feels the force, the epoch, the energy, the excess, the tempests in scalding teapots, the name-dropping, the bomb-dropping, the pants-dropping of Surrealists, Infrarealists, and other partisans who collectively, with their loquacity and dense yet casual range of nomenclature reference, make the "real" Nadal recede before us as a mere textual effect, a product of informed gossip. A typical head-spinning sentence:

Stalin's only daughter, Svetlana Alliluyeva, ended up in Spring Green, Wisconsin, in the late 1960s, unofficially adopted by (Frank Lloyd) Wright's wife after Mamah, the mad, Theosophical zealot Olgivanna, and there Svetlana still is.

This book represents six degrees of separation, in that everyone, no matter how "minor," is connected to numerous world-shakers. In fact, in this volume, there is no such thing as being minor. If you were there, you mattered. However militantly one movement or cadre opposes the other, there is no meritocracy, no ultimate ranking. Many times, literature seems a pretext for living—as it should be!—for ending up in the bed or in the bar, and in that sense, this compendium is an apologia for a lost time, no less suffused with longing and nostalgia for *le temps perdu* than is Proust's great work. One of my favorite letter writers herein, Laura Puig, describes making love with Nadal in her mother's bed, watching television until the mother discovers them, Nadal coolly talking his way out of the situation, and the mother clearly attracted to him. Such a discomfiture, turned to advantage, in this tome counts as paradise.

Faced with such a Babel of sentiments, both trenchant and soft in la république des lettres, I can only cite Proust, who, perhaps as a result of my erstwhile abortive self-translation, now comes to my mind in English, not even my second-best language.

A fashionable milieu is one in which everybody's opinion is made up of the opinion of all the others. Has everybody a different opinion? Then it is a literary milieu.

To my eminent surprise, this pellucid volume awakened in me a range of literary emotion I have not experienced in quite some time. In the unforgettable words of Man Ray, "Don't put my name on it. These are merely documents I make."