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## **Societal Metabolism and "Excretion": Towards a Typology of Marginals (The Fiction of Venedikt Yerofeyev, Alexander Zinoviev and Roberto Bolaño)**

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**Abstract:** The world of marginals was a topical theme during the second half of the twentieth century and continues to be so at the beginning of the twenty-first. The magnitude of this theme was acknowledged particularly with the birth of narrative urban anthropology and of reportages, as well as with the branching of sciences and the permeation of various socio-psychological methods of field research into large urban spaces. In the works of three authors – Venedikt Yerofeyev, Alexander Zinoviev and Roberto Bolaño – whose novels feature episodes involving marginals, the peripheral and the non-central become the marks of a spiritual, anti-establishment and anti-dogma elite. Spiritually and thematically speaking, marginality becomes central and matricial. The present study attempts a synthetic overview of the idea of marginality.

**Keywords:** Marginals; Periphery; Beggars; Vagrants; Homeless; Venedikt Yerofeyev; Alexander Zinoviev; Roberto Bolaño.

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The world of marginals was a topical theme during the second half of the twentieth century and remained so at the beginning of the twenty-first. This is not a new theme, but one that was borrowed or adapted from various *cours des miracles* that existed and are described in literature or in reportages from various periods, from François Villon to Giovanni Boccaccio, Charles Dickens, George Orwell, Thomas De Quincey, Jack London, John Clare, Jean-Paul Clébert, Pascal Bruckner, Jack Kerouac, and plenty of other authors (the list of names above is chronologically mixed in order to emphasize, at random, several seminal writers who approached the subject under discussion here). The magnitude of this theme was acknowledged particularly with the birth of narrative urban anthropology and of reportages conducted in this regard, as well as with the branching of socio-psychological sciences and the introduction of field research methods into the large urban spaces, targeted at beggary, unemployment, prostitution, alcoholism and drug addiction.<sup>1</sup>



The figures of beggars and homeless people occupy a central place in this thematic panopticon, given the diversity of quotidian characters. Thus, beggars are of several types: there are beggars who have a place to live, but who beg for food or for other reasons (because they are forced by their families or because they are sick and do not have any money for medicine), and there are vagrants, most of whom are alcoholics, who have lost their homes and jobs. Most of the homeless ones have lost everything, above all because they have lost their jobs and, thus, their official membership in society. Many analysts of this social phenomenon are justified in highlighting the difference between the so-called white trash (scant livelihood, abject poverty) and the absolute squalor of vagrants and homeless people. Absolute squalor entails the loss of one's home, job, the ability to feed and clothe oneself, in other words, the loss of everything. This social and financial squalor may be accompanied, then, by mental, moral, cultural and sexual squalor.

Begging is a form of social parasitism, but also a form of survival; hence, the diversity of beggar types. Whether we speak of beggars who have no home or of homeless people, they seek shelter in public gardens, subways, train stations and parking lots, landfills, derelict buildings. They are exposed to the two major threats, posed by drug addiction and crime. Most of them are male, being considered by analysts to be elements in a process of desocialization. In most cases, desocialization takes place for economic reasons (poverty, unemployment), but also for psychological reasons (family issues). They feed on waste and leftovers, on food provided by various social canteens or on food obtained through

begging. They wear clothes given to them by various charities or by the population or rummage for discarded garments in the garbage. Most of them die because of the cold and lack of hygiene, or because of various diseases triggered by absolute poverty; but they also die due to overdoses, different accidents or as a result of violent, criminal confrontations. For more than half of them, the rift with their family of origin is definitive, and that is why, when they gather in groups, both beggars and homeless people (and especially street children) develop street-based family relations. From a cultural (anthropological) point of view, beggars and homeless people speak a specific slang-jargon that relates to their lives, to their happy/ unhappy past and to the depiction of the fallen state of the present. Some of them (including street children) occasionally practise prostitution. In terms of its theatricality, there are three types of begging, distinguishable by discourse and mimic: 1. histrionic (beggars capitalize upon their pain and wounds, to impress passers-by, just like slang-dealing actors); 2. offensive (beggars exploit the bystanders' culpability and ritualistically highlight their status as victims, through a demonstration of force) and 3. regressive (beggars purposefully project themselves as powerless children who ask for help, attempting to arouse parental feelings in those passing by and in those they beseech to help them).

One of the appropriate psychological terms that has been applied especially to homeless persons, but also to beggars, is that of *womble foetuses*,<sup>2</sup> given that beggars and homeless persons are street people, strays, vagrants, without a roof over their heads, being often perceived by those with homes as "space usurpers." Marked



by alcoholism, smoking, food shortage and lack of hygiene, these people undergo three splits: the split from social reality, the split from their own identity (the break with the past and the future), the split from their own abused body (marked by disease and devoid of hygiene) and, adjacently, the split from their soul and psyche. Some of them do not even have surnames, but merely nicknames or just first names, assuming the meaning of nobodies or trash people and forming a sort of “tribe” with various rituals. Their body images are most intensely altered, for these people who suffer from various injuries and illnesses no longer give importance to wounds or bodily pestilence or to the excremental stage in which they merely subsist. Equally distorted are their sense of time and their diurnal-nocturnal rhythm: these “wombless foetuses” sleep especially during the day, preferring to gather in groups and keep watch over one another at night (as a rule).

These marginal and excluded individuals undergo psychic and moral decay, a kind of symbolic suicide, mentally speaking. The dissolution of the self evinces several stages. Their drifting marginalization starts through self-deprecation and loss of self-esteem. Those who come from broken or unstable families develop, in turn, unstable relationships, becoming emotionally bulimic, as the analyst Pierre Manoni considers.<sup>3</sup> They come to behave like objects, which can be moved from one place to another. Blockages, pessimism, self-abandonment lead them to resign from the world and from society (a process analysts refer to as *giving up-given up*), ousting themselves from it. Self-destruction through addiction channels their destiny. Their tattered garments are usually dirty and grimy. They

rarely show any shame (which is a positive factor, as it means that they feel uncomfortable with their condition, so they still have dignity and self-respect). However, the loss of the feeling of shame makes room for an acute sense of failure. Their emotional discourse is violent or precarious (these people no longer wish to communicate). They exhibit a certain immodesty (they display their deformities, festering sores, mutilations; they even make a spectacle of themselves sexually, in the absence of underwear).

For beggars and homeless persons, this loss of self-esteem is associated with a form of self-blame. Repetitive failure is considered the root of their troubles; hence, expressions such as “unfortunate” or “abandoned by fate.” These people feel that they magnetically draw catastrophe upon themselves. Barricading themselves in failure induces in them a feeling of inferiority and a sense of fatality. The most dangerous is negative narcissism, in the sense that beggars and homeless persons no longer reflect, but inhibit their identity, forging a negativized identity and even what psychoanalysts call “self-mourning.” The inferiority complex makes them identify with the image of waste, losers and aborted foetuses.<sup>4</sup>



In the case of the three authors (Venedikt Yerofeyev, Alexander Zinoviev and Roberto Bolaño), from whose works I will present below several sequences involving marginals, the peripheral and the non-central become the mark of a spiritual, anti-establishment and anti-dogma elite. In other words, marginality becomes central



and matricial, spiritually and thematically speaking.

The novel *Moscow-Petushki*, signed by Venedikt Yerofeyev, is experimental and based on slapstick humour, in the Gogolian and Bulgakovian tradition. It is a book written in 1969, whose protagonist is a drunkard called Venichka, a marginal character who is expelled from society. Yerofeyev extols the initiatory performance of an alcoholic who is endowed with black humour and an existentialist quasi-philosophical vocation, at least in order to highlight the twisted destiny of a marginal in the “brave new world” that the Soviet Union was deemed to represent. Alcohol also brings about poetic inspiration (Venichka is also a romantic, in a way), but it also means, within the novel’s two-fold scaffolding, the meaning of a hellish (as well as paradisiacal) fire, in which the redeemed sinner burns, *i.e.* the non-conformist, the dissident, the pariah, who is angelically connoted due to his alcoholist escapism from corrupt reality.

On his journey by train (from Moscow to Petushki), Venichka sips various types of spirits, for his alleged maturation and tolerance of reality: it is a *descensus ad inferos* devoid of any harshness and deliberately comic, albeit risky and fatal. The character, however, forewarns the reader that beyond the limit of merry drunkenness, just around the corner, there lie in wait insanity and swinery (the terms belong to him). What is recommended is purposeful, progressive drunkenness, as well as food scarcity, for these are just punishments for pride and faithlessness.

Venichka is a storyteller, whenever he has an opportunity: he usually listens to stories or tells them himself. As a *trickster*

on the Moscow-Petushki train, he is even nicknamed, at one point, Scheherazade. Incidentally, this character’s vocation is narrativity, which he can draw from almost any fact of life, including from drunkenness and passivity. In his hallucinations, Venichka (who is struck by a fever, albeit with touches of intoxication) descends into a simulated inferno, haunted by all sorts of creatures, amid his emotional, but not mental collapse. The train ride then turns into a demented rush through Moscow, where, near the Kremlin, the character is executed by four emissaries of the authorities with an allure of common law criminals: his execution is akin to that of Joseph K. from Kafka’s *Trial*. And yet, Venichka the drunkard is saved through his martyrdom – the persecutions the alcohol-addicted character is subjected to are a form of crucifixion, and the Inferno proves to have been worthwhile passing through, for things acquire a mystical tint.

Drunkards were also used as key characters by another high ranking Russian novelist from the diaspora, at the end of the twentieth century. In his *Antechamber to Paradise*, Alexander Zinoviev renders alcoholics as ethical characters who are able to turn the tavern into a space of *causerie* unto dissent, of rebellion and lack of compliance with the spirit of (Soviet) totalitarianism. Alexander Zinoviev relies on the idea of an anti-Communist confraternity, foregrounding the marginals’ subversive dialogues in the tavern, alcohol being both a solution for bearing and overcoming failure and a means of acquiring the status of ineffable *raisonneurs*. The “drunkards” in Alexander Zinoviev’s novel are cheerful dissidents, with a religious or moral sense, however. The tavern changes, in fact, into a



“church” and a burlesque “tribunal,” in relation to the totalitarian reality.

*The Savage Detectives* by Roberto Bolaño is an underground novel about a horde of South and Central American poets: around two hundred of the most diverse poets are mentioned eulogistically, punitively or sarcastically, in an attempt to outline a history of underground poetry, but also of official poetry, in a sort of lampooning panorama. What does a horde of poets do? It is wild, passionate, barbarian – hence, the exacerbated sexuality of its members, their emphatic alcoholism, their pro-artistic addictions and their deliberately exhibitionistic jargon.

Bolaño’s novel is, as its author insists, a love epistle to his generation of marginals, but it is also a pamphlet, so the alternation between utopia and anti-utopia is genuinely assumed. Here is a thoroughly captivating detail, constantly featured in the subtext: *The Savage Detectives* is not just an underground novel about poetry, but also a book about living people, parasitically inhabited by or obscurely initiated into death, despite their intense sexual and intellectual life. There are no main characters, but only secondary ones or, possibly, an underground collective character, consisting of the mass of visceral realist poets (as they define themselves), their companions and their witnesses.

The brilliance of Bolaño’s prose style is predicated primarily on self-generational poetic references. *The Savage Detectives* is a novel about poetry and poets and about how poetry prevails upon prose, but by using the weapons of prose. The characters in *The Savage Detectives* do not necessarily write in order to publish their works, but because of a special (ontological) reason, so

as to get to know themselves and to see how far they can get cognitively speaking, be it in a minimalist and marginal way, as outsiders (this being the neo-realist path, of quotidian immediacy). Bolaño’s novel ironically recounts the history of a *jungle-like literature*, with its strategies, tactics, verdicts and intrigues, targeting two camps of authors and creators: on the one hand, the visceral realists, on the other hand the inhabitants of Stridentopolis (a utopian city of unofficial poets, the rivals of the visceral realists). Everyone talks about poetry or reads poetry in this novel. And poetry is umbilically connected to sex, poverty, alcohol, drugs, marginality and “human recklessness” (the latter term belongs to the author).

Bolaño’s novel has, then, the merit of being a narrative about poetic lyricism, about the beauty of miserabilism and, above all, about a new aesthetics of ugliness, described at leisure, like a leitmotif. It is not by chance that the metaphor (or symbol) of the pigsty often occurs in his text, for it is a creative sty, suggesting that literature is born from human squalor. It is for this reason that *The Savage Detectives* is a novel full of sweat, vomit, pestilence, reeking smells, grime, pariahs, aborted fetuses, swinish beings (physically and mentally). A tendentious book, deliberately assumed as such, about a sort of literary lumpen-proletariat, owner of the new aesthetics of ugliness. Wretched reality emanates the “Sons of Caliban,” as the author calls them, on an experimental creative island, through a new aesthetics of ugliness and through self-defined marginals, without any Ariels or Prosperos amongst them (the representatives of old literature and the traditional canon).

Translated by Carmen Borbély



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## NOTES

1. I also approached this issue in another study, published a decade ago. See Ruxandra Cesereanu, “La idea de alteridad y la mentalidad colectiva : desde la proyección de una razas inferiores a marginados y excluidos”, in Christian Wentzlaff-Eggebert (ed.), *Europa como espacio cultural: La identidad y las instituciones europeas*, Kölner Beiträge zur Lateinamerika-Forschung, Universität zu Köln, Arbeitskreis Spanien-Portugal-Lateinamerika, 2005, pp. 68-76.
2. Patrick Declerck, “La Maison, le clochard et l’uterus,” in Dan Ferrand-Bechmann (ed.), *Pauvre et mal loge. Les enjeux sociaux de l’habitat. Comparaison internationale*, Paris, Editions L’Harmattan, 1990, pp. 143-158.
3. Pierre Mannoni, *La malchance sociale*, Paris, Editions Odile Jacob, 2000.
4. I have summarized here ideas from books authored by Howard Becker (*Outsiders. Studies in the Sociology of Deviance*, Free Press, 1997) and from the three books edited by Gilles Ferreol and Adrian Neculau (*Minoritari, marginali, excluși*, Iași, Editura Polirom, 1996; *Aspecte psihosociale ale sărăciei*, Iași, Editura Polirom, 1999; *Violența. Aspecte psihosociale*, Iași, Editura Polirom, 2003).