

Between violence and redemption: a study of Amulet from the perspective of Benjamin's "Angel of History"

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Abstract. Roberto Bolaño's *Amulet* reconstructs the political trauma and cultural memory of Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s through the first-person narrative of the Uruguayan poet Auxilio. From the three dimensions of body, space, and time, the text localizes and reconfigures Walter Benjamin's "Angel of History" theory: Bolaño replaces Benjamin's redemptive expectation with a writing of violence, creating an ethics of memory based on the recurrence of trauma rather than transcendent release. This offers a unique paradigm for literary responses to historical violence.

Keywords: Amulet, Bolaño, Angel of History, Benjamin

1. Introduction

Roberto Bolaño's *Amulet* reconstructs the political trauma and cultural memory of Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s through the first-person narrative of the Uruguayan poet Auxilio. Existing scholarship on *Amulet* at home and abroad mainly focuses on its deconstruction of historical narrative, its expression of traumatic memory, and the ethical significance of its female perspective. Zheng Wen points out that through narrative strategies such as repetition, ambiguity, and collage, Bolaño transforms real historical events like the Tlatelolco massacre into dreamlike accounts, disrupting the dominance of a linear view of history [1]. Enrique Schumukler further proposes the "Atlas Principle," [2] arguing that Bolaño, drawing on Aby Warburg's art-historical methodology, uses fragmented narrative to dismantle the myth of "objective history," turning the text into a "visual knowledge tool" that resists historical hegemony. Rory O'Brien, from a psychoanalytic perspective, sees Auxilio's narration as embodying a form of "melancholic resistance," [3] wherein her repeated returns to historical events break the ethical demand for "healthy forgetting." This melancholia is not passive trauma but an active expression of political will. Andrea Marinescu focuses on the maternal dimension of trauma narrative—Auxilio's self-proclaimed role as the "mother of Mexican poetry" represents an attempt to reconstruct traumatic memory through maternal ethics. Her helplessness in watching young poets descend into ruin calls for an "ethics of care," subverting the traditional Latin American political trope of the "Holy Mother/Mother" as a symbol of suffering, and reconstructing political responsibility in a nonviolent manner [4].

Overall, existing scholarship on *Amulet* has moved beyond the traditional trauma narrative framework toward an interdisciplinary engagement with history, philosophy, and feminism, offering a distinctive paradigm for understanding cultural memory in post-dictatorship Latin America. Yet, there remains room for further exploration: why does Bolaño choose to create the figure of a "mother of poets" trapped for thirteen days in the women's bathroom of Mexico University's literature department? Why does he choose to narrate violence through a female perspective emerging from the fissures of history? To address these dual questions, this paper adopts Benjamin's "Angel of History" theory as its analytical framework, examining how Bolaño uses a distinctive narrative of violence to recover Latin America's own "amulet."

2. An analysis of Benjamin's "Angel of History" theoretical framework

Benjamin's image of the "Angel of History" emerges from his critique of historicism and his reflections on "now-time" (*Jetztzeit*), and carries a dialectical significance. To understand its deeper meaning, one must first clarify several core concepts in Benjamin's philosophy of history.

2.1. Ruins, redemption, and the Messiah

Benjamin argues that historicism seeks continuity, treating the “present” as an insignificant transitional stage between past and future, thus turning history into a closed, homogeneous whole and suppressing its revolutionary potential. Historical materialism, by contrast, seeks rupture—injecting meaning from the present into the forgotten past, a process Benjamin calls “redemption.” The “Angel of History” is the bearer of this hope for redemption. In Benjamin’s framework, “ruins” testify to historical violence but also embody the possibility of redemption, secularized as the revival of memory in this world rather than eternal salvation in the next. The coming of the “Messiah” transcends eschatological judgment, representing instead the sudden awakening of historical consciousness—a moment when past suffering acquires present meaning and the voices of the oppressed are heard anew.

2.2. The storm of progress and the paradox of the mission

Benjamin describes the “Angel of History” in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History* as follows: “His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.[5]” The “storm of progress” is one of the most vivid metaphors in Benjamin’s historical philosophy, representing the violent logic of modernity. Under the banner of development, civilization, and progress, history also becomes destructive, sweeping away tradition, memory, and human compassion.

The paradox at the heart of the “Angel of History” lies in this: the angel wishes to repair the world but is inexorably pushed toward the future. The angel’s backward gaze disrupts the linear conception of history while maintaining hope for redemption. This “looking back” is not mere nostalgia, but a critical re-examination of the forgotten past that exposes the violence hidden beneath the myth of progress.

2.3. From the “Angel of History” to Amulet: the ethics of witness in writing violence

Benjamin’s dialectical thinking about rupture and redemption is transformed in contemporary Latin American literature into a focus on witnessing historical trauma and writing violence. In *Amulet*, the character of Auxilio functions as a literary embodiment of the “Angel of History” in the Latin American context.

Auxilio and the “Angel of History” are both witnesses rather than participants in history, both bearers of an impossible mission of redemption, and both experience an existential paradox suspended between past and future. Auxilio is not modeled on any single historical poet but is a highly symbolic figure. She has a strong sense of identity, yet her existence is ambiguous and suspended. She is homeless, describing herself as having voluntarily exiled herself from Uruguay out of “fervor” and “culture”: “I—Auxilio, age indeterminate, mother of poets, lover of books, born in Uruguay or the Eastern Republic, witness to a sky-wide drought.[4]” Her emphatic, declarative self-definition stands in paradox to her aimless, drifting life, making her both anchored in history and yet a floating, memorial presence—an observer removed from harsh reality, suffused with detachment. This suspended state is a literary translation of the “Angel of History”—charged with witnessing but unable to intervene in historical processes.

As the “mother of poets,” Auxilio is imbued with the impulse to trust, protect, and witness the next generation of Mexican poets. Yet she “reaches out her hands, as if begging Heaven to embrace them; she shouts, but her cries vanish on the high ground, never reaching the canyon.[6]” This futile impulse to save them mirrors the tension in Benjamin’s image of the angel. Bolaño’s writing of violence converges with Benjamin’s redemptive path here. Auxilio’s “personal experience” is not only a testimony to specific political violence but also a reflection on the very logic of violence. This writing is not meant to incite hatred or fear but to seek the possibility of redemption amidst the ruins of history—to insist on an ethics of witnessing even in the depths of despair.

3. A “Third-World Angel”: Amulet as a Latin American transcription of Benjamin’s “Angel of History”

As both poet and novelist, Roberto Bolaño is deeply committed in his writing to the “historical truth” of events. He is drawn to uncovering the motivations and underlying mechanisms behind the acts of violence he depicts. In *Amulet*, through the figure of Auxilio as a Latin American “Third-World Angel,” Bolaño localizes and rewrites Benjamin’s “Angel of History” theory, crafting a distinctive mode of writing violence.

3.1. Embodiment of the body: from transcendent observer to carrier of violence

Benjamin’s “Angel of History” is a transcendent, immaterial observer who gazes at the ruins of history while remaining removed from its reality. In contrast, Auxilio in *Amulet*—as the Latin American “angel”—is first and foremost given a concrete, embodied form: she is a female, aging, and vulnerable body. Auxilio’s body bears clear marks of violence, as she describes herself: “Thin, wrinkled, covered in wounds, my heart bleeding, my eyes crying,[6]” and repeatedly references her missing teeth “lost at the altar of human sacrifice.” [6] Unlike Benjamin’s incorporeal angelic gaze, Auxilio’s physical body is a living archive of historical trauma. This focus on the body underscores the specific experience of Third-World women in histories of violence: they are not only witnesses but also direct recipients of violence.

Auxilio’s birthing posture in the toilet stall carries powerful metaphorical weight. She “quietly lifted her legs, like a ballerina in a Renoir painting, as if about to give birth,[6]” waiting in the “deathly silence” outside. Surrounded by violence, her body both bears trauma and gestates new possibility. This dual role as “victim” and “creator” captures the core feature of Bolaño’s writing of violence: even as he depicts violence unflinchingly, he preserves a belief in the possibility of redemption.

3.2. The gendering of space: from public ruin to private toilet

Benjamin’s “Angel of History” stands amid a depersonalized, non-gendered, de-historicized space of “ruins” caused by the storm of progress. By contrast, the historical space in *Amulet* is explicitly gendered and geopolitically situated: the women’s restroom on the fourth floor of the Philosophy and Literature building at Mexico’s National Autonomous University. This intensely gendered, private, and “dirty” space starkly contrasts with the public space of violent repression outside the campus.

The novel’s central image of the “mirror” links multiple spaces while exposing layers of violence. Like a pool of water, it reflects both sides of the same coin [6]: the female poet clutching her book and the heavily armed soldiers, the quiet upstairs women’s bathroom and the blood-soaked military action below, repressed private female space and the violent male-dominated public space, the people and authoritarian power, maternity and destruction, poetry and reality. These spatial and imagistic contrasts reveal the structure of violence in Latin American society: women are confined to private, marginalized spaces while men occupy the public, violent spaces; literature exists in the cramped fissures of idealism while violence dominates reality.

The mirror’s second appearance [6] during the massive Mexican student protests of 1973 further expands its symbolic meaning. In the mirror, Auxilio sees a “canyon” that echoes the “canyon beneath the skirt of the giantess” in Remedios Varo’s painting—clearly a vaginal metaphor. It simultaneously evokes death and rebirth, both the abyss into which young people fall and the field that echoes with song. This transformation of spatial meaning embodies Bolaño’s dialectical approach to writing violence: finding the possibility of new life in the filthiest, most marginalized spaces, and maintaining hope in the most desperate situations. By gendering space, Bolaño overlays the female bodily space with the historical space of Latin America, forging a unique mode of writing violence in which violence is not merely an abstract historical force but something internalized within the most intimate spaces of the body.

3.3. Nonlinear time: from redemptive moment to recurrence of trauma

Benjamin’s “Angel of History” theory conceives of time through the concept of “Messianic time,” which explodes linear history and realizes redemption in a moment of “now-time.” In *Amulet*, although time is also depicted nonlinearly, the aim is not direct redemption but to ensure that forgotten pain is eternally witnessed through the recurrence of trauma.

In Benjamin’s thought, “Messianic time” retains a theological orientation toward salvation. Bolaño’s *Amulet* localizes and rewrites this idea: Auxilio’s experience of time is marked by interwoven, looping trauma, in which “time folds up like a dream and then unfolds again.[6]” The recurring image of Auxilio’s lost teeth functions as an anchor in this temporal journey: in 1968, trapped in the restroom, she remembers her missing teeth [6], but “in September 1968 all my teeth were still there,” while the 1962 version of herself already mentions “lips with no front teeth.” In

Bolaño's narrative world, trauma does not obey linear chronology—it can travel from future to past, making suffering arrive prematurely.

When the post-1968 Auxilio meets the ghost of Remedios Varo, who died in 1963, they encounter each other in freely flowing time. Varo's spirit does not promise successful redemption but conveys the imperative of persistence: "Don't think too much! Keep going! ... Let your soul roam free through space and time!" [6] This persistence is not about waiting for salvation but about ensuring the continuity of witnessing. Auxilio repeatedly returns to the terrifying scene in the university's women's restroom in 1968 to overcome history's "amnesia." Unlike Benjamin's angel, who maintains hope for redemption by transcending pain, Auxilio's mission is to resist through witnessing pain itself. This shift in temporal logic reveals the fundamental difference between Bolaño's writing of violence and Benjamin's concept of redemption: in *Amulet*, time is not a bridge to salvation but a stage for the eternal return of trauma. Bolaño resists forgetting to ensure that the violent truths of history are never beautified or ignored.

4. Conclusion

Re-examining *Amulet* through the lens of Benjamin's theory aims to provide a locally grounded reading of a European canonical framework and to reveal the unique spatio-temporal ethics obscured by postcolonial paradigms. *Amulet* replaces Benjamin's redemptive expectation with its distinctive "writing of violence" and "repetition of trauma," articulating a specifically Latin American strategy for confronting historical trauma and completing a localized reconstruction of the "Angel of History" theory.

First, it exposes the distinctive nature of Latin American violence: unlike the violence of European modernity, which is often cloaked in the rhetoric of "Enlightenment" and "rationality," Latin American violence remains naked, direct, and unadorned. Second, it expands the political function of literature—not to offer moral justification or confer transcendent meaning on violence, but to insist on showing violence in its most primal and ugly forms, using repeated representations of trauma to call for the prevention of history's repetition. Finally, it constructs a specifically Latin American ethics of historical writing: to sustain internal resistance without the promise of external salvation, to insist on the presence of witnessing in the very depths of violence. Between "violence" and "redemption," Bolaño chooses to shoulder the weight of history through the ethics of literary witnessing. This, ultimately, is the true "amulet" he offers to Latin America and to the Global South more broadly.

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