

Minor Literature and Poetic Exchanges: Sophie Podolski and Infrarealists

Using Heidegger's term in *Language in the Poem*, Sophie Podolski and the infrarealists are situated at the same poetic site—a hybrid of the Country Where Everything is Permitted(Le Pays Out Tout Est Permis) and the Unknown University (La Universidad Desconocida). They also belong to the same canon of literature left in limbo except for the rising fame of Roberto Bolaño, the kind of “minor literature” defined by Deleuze and Guattari as embodying the potential of expressing another possible community and to forge the means for another consciousness and another sensibility. Rather than dislocating Podolski and Infrarealism away from the site of marginality and absence, a more fruitful approach to interact with such minor literature is to focus on the poetic exchanges amongst themselves, and to read their poetry and poetics as a philosophy of seeking freedom and existential authenticity and as a politics of refusal through counter-writing. The traditional autobiographical reading or semantic decoding of such avant-garde writing would reach an oxymoronic “translucent opacity” or a superficial understanding that is against their poetry's inherent desires of resisting interpretation and recognition. If the reader focuses too much on the individual lines and verses themselves, one might be easily tricked into an attitude of dismissiveness as many of the experiments of language borders on total incomprehensibility. Read together, many of the Infrarealists' poems create networks of image, gesture, and sensation. “They are more than the sum of their parts—they are living poetic exchange.” (Heinowitz,⁴) Even though Podolski predates the formation of Infrarealism, she is a source of inspiration for Bolaño to write the *Infrarealism Manifesto* and is included within their collectivity. A focused reading on Podolski's Le Pays and Bolano's Unknown University as a collective entity leads to a cross-temporal conversation on a consistent

poetic statement of “writing is a living thing.” Rather than a performative hippie gesture as brutally characterized by some critics, their statement is fundamentally a serious quest on ethics and aesthetics, the unity of thoughts and actions and the writer’s material position within society.

The group of Infrealism emerged around the 1970s, when the avant-garde was thought to be dead, a phenomenon of the past, especially in Europe. The movement gained its name when Roberto Bolaño, one of the leading characters of the movement derived the name from the novelette *Infra Draconis*, where the term *infrasoles* “refers to stars that are not shown on sky maps because they have a non-gleaming appearance, despite their heat” (Fabre.10) this term describes exactly the group’s position in the constellation of the literary and cultural field. With the influence of Sophie Podolski and the Brussel Montfaucon Research Center, who proposed the utopia of *The Country Where Everything is Permitted* (Le Pays Où tout est Permis), the Infrealism movement is fundamentally, a revolution of poetry. The movement opposed to a poetic tradition of poets being egocentric and solitary beings promoting his or her individual oeuvre, but also, against the whole literary and cultural establishment that is mediocre in the practice of art and hierarchical in terms of their politics. They are also against the Surrealists’ association with the institutions have that have reduced the surrealist adventure into another mundane intellectual practice. What they advocated is a clean cut from everything, institutions, cultural establishments, traditions, and to merge a passionate and convulsive life with poetry, to live as poems rather as poets, and to write poems even in prose. They challenge a younger generation of poets to leave behind social comforts and dependencies, and to embrace the state of marginality, otherness and difference, “Infrealists propose Indigenism to the world: a crazy, shy Indian,” envisioning a new lyricism that begins to grow in Latin America.” (Bolaño.42)

A major external cause that led to Infrealists' status of "minor literature" is their tactic of refusing to publish---not through the official mediums of the Mexican literary establishment, and very often, not at all. Such act of refusal is their ethical choice of not participating in the system that blocks, nullifies, and distorts the expressions of others from the centers of power, which makes sense when the artists during that time fully depended on state sponsorship and there existed an exclusivity of all literary production as an activity for the upper class, as well as an outsized authority of Octavio Paz. This naturally led to their fragility and lack of legitimate presence in the Mexican literary scene, often seen as "cultural terrorists" or "juvenile". Yet the greater such counterforces are, the more solidified is their ethics of counterproduction, with poetry placed at the heart of all rebellion. Such ethics fits into Foucault definition "a mode of relating to contemporary reality; a voluntary choice made by certain people; in the end, a way of thinking and feeling; a way too, of acting and behaving that at one and the same time marks a relation of belonging and presents itself as a task." (Foucault, 32) The protagonists within Bolaño's universe are modeled after the infrealists themselves--- being active agents in transforming everyday life at all costs. The poet is not a mere historical witness who observes and reflects but is a participant who comply his or her actions with thought and poetics.

Podolski's writing shares the same living quality of spontaneous combustibility, of a prose-poetic sequence complemented by her drawings that burst into flames. Her writing lives a kind of second life in Roberto Bolano's works, when he devoted a poem to her in his *Unknown University* and modeled the mother of Mexican avant-garde poetry in *The Savage Detectives* after Podolski. She "mocked the normalization of printing and the dimensionality of traditional alphabetic writing. She kept herself apart from publication." (Convert, 41) Drawings and letters complement one another in her work that aims at an overthrow of the semantic order. Such

graphic poetry is created via hour-long plunging into a trance-like or meditative state, created live through an outpour of thoughts and emotions on capitalism, music, schizophrenia, sex, drugs, chemistry, and social systems etc. There is a stubbornness of refusing to be subjected to the discourse of the masters or to take refuge in the posture of the immersed body. Her own history is her poetic site. According to Jean-Philippe Convert, “her articulated desire to become multiple and marginal, always in between her time and ours and offers an urgent contemporary perspective. People always think of a majoritarian future (when I grow up, when I have power) whereas the problem is that of a minoritarian becoming, not pretending, not plating or imitating the child, the madman, the woman, the animal, the stammerer or the foreigner, but becoming all these, to invent new forces or new weapons.”(Convert, 48) Like the infrarealists, she is translating a form of life into a form of art and vice versa, a flow of transgressions and perversions, a series play of limits that incessantly crosses and recrosses a line. Writing is both the cure and the symptom.

Despite the strong ties between Sophie Podolski’s personal history and her writing, it is still possible to make the laceration and read her writing as an individual entity. Convert has described the relationship between her identity with her language with a quote from Le Pays, “I once saw an actor playing drunkenness---it took me a while to realize that he had put together his act taking this from the drunkard---that from the other---from another the slurred speech--- from the other the movements---or the actions---of memories and with bits and pieces had made a patchwork of drunkenness that didn’t correspond to any possible drunkard and had no center---no truth.” (Convert,70) Sophie’ writing is akin to this actor improvising inebriation---"it is decentered, split, that is always on the verge of falling into oblivion. Into this oblivion that moves like an eclipse. Into this love that moves according to a mechanism like the sea’s.”

(Convert, 70) There are moments when she eclipses herself like an actor eclipsing himself or herself to play the role, when she forgets herself, that is when she moves beyond all self-censorship and self-regulation and produce the work that is most alive.

How to write a scholarly essay on Infrealism and Podolski is an intriguing paradox since the academia is the very site that they protest against, and to theorize and generalize their writings seem almost an act of barbarism that goes against their ideal of writing poetry even in prose. These questions of “systems” and “paradox of exceptions” echo the philosophical question of the possibility of being “outside” the world that one’s currently inside from the perspective of Hegel’s philosophy of language. Hegel describes the presuppositional structure thanks to which language is at once outside and inside itself and the immediate (the nonlinguistic) reveals itself to be nothing but a presupposition position of language. “Language,” he wrote in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, “is the perfect element in which interiority is as external as exteriority is internal” (Heidegger, 147) Integrating life with poetry is a mission that could only be actualized in language as only within this realm that the boundaries between interiority and exteriority is blurred, and only through poetry, that they could claim to live in a *Le Pays Où tout est Permis*.

Within this poetic country, the ground principle is to keep writing from becoming a profession, and rather to release the full energy when writing becomes a living thing. “Man is exactly the living being without work, which is to say, devoid of any specific vocation.” (Agamben, 64) The human being is characterized by the essential inoperativity of reinventing itself, to have the potential to be and do otherwise. Such inoperativity deactivates existing values and powers, stripping away the accumulated habits and customs that furrow one’s potentiality into one cultural mode of being. The Infrealists’ countries are far from utopian, and they

distinct themselves from the beautiful and the sublime of Romanticism. Instead, the poems aim to reflect upon the dark and brutal reality of political trauma. Bolaño converts poetry into “Poetry”, “a suspicious character who frequents dark alleys and shady motels, interacts with hustlers and prostitutes, offends conventional decorum, and antagonizes aesthetic codes by celebrating marginality.” (Medina,18)

Podolski and Infrealism makes sense through each other, especially in terms of their poetic concepts. Taking the prominent Infrealist figure of Roberto Bolaño as example, Podolski’s work sheds light upon his choices of writing 13 pages long prose poems, playing around with various forms such as meta-poems in verse, autobiographical verse poems, detective genre poems in verse, intermedial verse poems that includes visual media etc within his anthologies of the *Unknown University* and *Antwerp*. *The Unknown University* echoes the concept of *Le Pays Ou Tout est Permis*, which suggests the plurality and open possibilities of poetry in which everyone is invited to participate, without prescriptions and proscriptions about what counts as a poem, and what doesn’t. Both the Unknown University and *Le Pays* are created in a way that records the poet’s bodily occupation of these territories. Similar motifs slide in and out the lines of Bolaño and Podolski like serpents that bring them closer together:

Metamorphosis, animalization, mixing images with texts, horror vacui, nightmare, mythological and erotic scenes...Podolski’s poetry is more associative and more akin to daydreaming, to the point that the associations of thoughts may occur incoherent and incomprehensible. Being a reader of Podolski himself, Bolaño has abstained from the desire of interpreting her. He understands her poem’s desires to escape such codification and he has instead appreciated the way her poetry operates and included her as a symbolic character within several of his works, giving her access to enter his Unknown University in some sense. According to Nicole Rudick,

Bolaño's *Infrarealist Manifesto*, composed in 1976, "could have sprung from a reading of Le pays: Tenderness like an exercise in speed. Breath and heat. Experience at full tilt, self-consuming structures, stark raving contradictions. In a neat triangulation of influence, Bolaño makes sly reference in the manifesto to Burroughs's Nova Express and echoes Podolski's affiliated worlds: "The bridges of Noba Express are anti-codification. . . . Our bridges to unknown stations. The poem interrelating reality and unreality." (Rudick, 3)

If you're worthy of the country, she writes, your eyes will light up the inside and the outside. "We want to fuck the people we meet in passing—but beds are in houses—hotels are expensive—we should live in the street and make theater and go out to buildings not making theater—then we'd have something like the PLAYFUL CITY—and yet sleep is already in the street—already the street is asleep—"

In dialogue with Podolski's imaginative and playful depiction of two worlds layered upon each other, the infrarealists wrote "Put the whole city in the insane asylum." The poems are set in the place in the universe called The Labyrinths, filled with "the snipers, the butcher in supermarkets, the lone plainsmen who devastate the Chinese cafes of Latin America." who are also poets in some sense. The true imagination is the one that dynamites, elucidates, injects emerald microbes into other imaginations. What's important is to act, to make new sensations appear, subverting the everyday. Abandon everything, again hit the road. Bolano wrote about how he shared similar dreams with Podolski when he was around 20 years old—"and the dream lived in the void of my spirit... And sometimes I'd retreat inside myself and visit the dream: a statue eternalized in liquid thoughts...a white worm writhing in love. A runaway love, a dream

within another dream. And the nightmare telling me: You will grow up. But back then, growing up would have been a crime. I'm here, I said, with the romantic dogs and here I am going to stay." (Bolaño,86) Though not specifically dedicated to Podolski, her dream was inside his and she was his past.

The art of Podolski and Infrealists are not time capsules, and their concept is never outdated. It corresponds with the notion of art as an expressive capacity of living immanence that holds a counterweight to capital as abstract, overcoding and mutagenic immanence. Thereby resisting capitalism's determination to create a world which "annuls passions, that is, the only forces which render life worth living." It revolts against a constraining present composed of captured possibilities with the continuous promise of the generation of potential." The work of art would really appear as experimentation; with not only materials traditionally conceived as being "artistic" leading to art practice (paint, rarified language, codified forms of sound and movement), but also with an extensive array of quotidian kinds of sensory experiences contributing to the human experience of the artistic.

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