It’s hard to imagine a less Vendleresque critic (or Dickin-
sonian poet) than Ezra Pound. Too jokey, too impatient for close
readings, he always leaped unpredict-
ably from the detail to the big pic-
ture. In 1917–18 he published a series of twenty articles, “Studies in Con-
temporary Mentality,” that took on the giant subject of the British peri-
odical, all the way from stuffy old
Blackwood’s to middle-class women’s
magazines like Quiter to the lowbrow
Family Herald. Pound took a special interest
in the Herald’s medical-advice column, “Helps
to Health”:

Archie has perhaps “an
excess of natural waxy se-
cretion in the ears”; white
curd soap is recommend-
ed. Exercise, air, washing of
various parts are sug-
gested to other correspon-
dents. The family physi-
cian seems possessed of
good sense. The column
is doubtless useful, and other weeklies
might profit by similar methods.

As an indication of stratnum note
that the “Family Herald” is the first
paper in which I have found ads. rela-
tive to “hits and vermin in the hair,”
and the ad. beginning “IF YOUR
CHILD has nits or head pests.” It is
arguable, by these portents, that the
“Family Herald” reaches, or at least
approaches, the verminous level, but
still it is a cut above “Punch.”

Sociologists, semioticians, the
Frankfurt School—in his slapdash
way Pound anticipates them all. In
MODERNISM IN THE MAGA-
ZINES: AN INTRODUCTION
(Yale, $40), Robert Scholes and Clif-
ford Wulfman claim Pound as the
father of a more specific discipline:
the study of magazines. The ones that
interest them most are the Poundian
“little magazines,” such as Poetry,
Rhythm, and Blast, that did so much
to promote modern movements in
literature and art.

Scholes, a former president of
the Modern Language Association, and
Wulfman, a digital librarian, intend
their book as a primer for academics
who want to figure out how magazines in
the early twentieth century actually worked.

They give hints on how to compare
contributor lists, how to interpret cir-
culation figures, how to relate advertising
to editorial content. They decry the old
archival practice of tearing out ad pages.
Magazines, they argue, need to be stud-
died and digitized intact.

Having recently woken up the editor
of a literary magazine, I found myself
riveted by this book. Here was a page
from a 1920 issue of Poetry with what we
call a “house” ad (for Harriet Monroe’s
lectures on the new trends in verse) di-
rectly below an ad for
Horlicks malted milk. How
on earth did she land
Horlicks? The question
may be of narrow interest,
but I suspect even nonpro-
essionals will enjoy Pound’s
original articles, which
Scholes and Wulfman re-
print in their entirety—
and will be charmed by the
author’s unabashed plea-
sure in old ephemera:

Long ago John Stuart Mill
suggested that poetry was “over-
heard”—not directly addressed to
the reader—and later I. A. Richards picked
up that notion and incorporated it into
his own poetics. The transformation in
magazine advertising that takes place
as a magazine recedes from us in time
moves it in this very direction. We—
contemporary readers of old magazine
advertising—are not being directly ad-
dressed either. We have been put in the
position of the audience for poetry.

It is a melancholy truth that most
ads age better than
most poems. Scholes
and Wulfman em-
brace that truth with-
out holding it against
either kind of commu-
nication. They don’t
make us choose be-
 tween the moderns and un-
derstanding how they paid the bills.

In the United States, the Chilean
Roberto Bolaño is best known as
the author of two sprawling novels
written late in his short life: The Savage
Detectives and 2666. But in his lifetime
he made his name as a writer of short
stories and novellas. The best of them,
like “Clara,” “Last Evenings on Earth,”
and By Night in Chile, are perfect in a
way the longer works never tried to be.

Someone is telling a story he or she
doesn’t understand and yet needs to get
right: that is the basic dilemma in Bol-
ão’s fiction. His narrators second-
guess themselves: “I heard some young-
sters saying, Pepe the Cop, Pepe the
Cop, then laughing, as if my nickname
were the funniest joke in the world. Or
maybe they were laughing for some other
reason.” They embellish movies, con-
versations, books, and songs with the
meanings they should have had:
“The song was about a pier and mist,
and faithless lovers (as all lovers are in
the end, he thought indulgently) and
places that remain steadfastly faithful.”
His stories have none of the fake inti-
macy, and presuming friendliness, of
most American short fiction. They are
more like depositions or religious testi-
monials. Often his stories involve writ-
ers: Bolaño found writers inherently
absurd and touching. They are to him
what priests are to J. F. Powers, quix-
otic heroes trapped in a twilight faith.

THE INSUFFERABLE GAUCHO
(New Directions, $22.95) reminds us
how many kinds of story Bolaño could
write on his favorite themes.2 The
title story—a parody of Borges and
other Argentine worshipers of the
gaucho—is Bolaño at his most purely
comical. Set during the currency cri-
sis of 2001, it involves a lawyer who
retires to the pampas only to find the
milk replaced by feral rabbits. The
disparate collection also includes an
homage to Kafka (“Police Rat”) and the
famous essay “Litera-
ture + Illness = Illness.”

In my favorite story,
“Álvaro Rousselot’s
Journey,” an Argenti-
ne writer makes a
pilgrimage to the
French moviemaker
who has plagiarized
his novels. This
shaggy-dog tale, full of ironic respect
for the trade of the pulp writer and wry
disdain for the vagaries of literary fash-
ion, makes an ideal introduction to the
Bolaño imaginaire.

2 In the interest of full disclosure—and fu-
ture scholarship!—an advertisement for
The Insufferable Gaudo appears in the
most recent issue of The Paris Review.

"Rinso," a British magazine advertisement, c. 1910 © The Advertising Archives, London;
"Study of Rabbits," by Charles Famin © Adoc photos/Art Resource, New York City