

Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

TCLC 254

TOPICS VOLUME

Volume 254

Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

**Commentary on Various Topics
in Twentieth-Century Literature, including Literary
and Critical Movements, Prominent Themes and
Genres, Anniversary Celebrations, and Surveys
of National Literatures**



**Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism, Vol.
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Preface

Since its inception *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism* (TCLC) has been purchased and used by some 10,000 school, public, and college or university libraries. TCLC has covered more than 1000 authors, representing over 60 nationalities and nearly 50,000 titles. No other reference source has surveyed the critical response to twentieth-century authors and literature as thoroughly as TCLC. In the words of one reviewer, “there is nothing comparable available.” TCLC “is a gold mine of information—dates, pseudonyms, biographical information, and criticism from books and periodicals—which many librarians would have difficulty assembling on their own.”

Scope of the Series

TCLC is designed to serve as an introduction to authors who died between 1900 and 1999 and to the most significant interpretations of these author’s works. Volumes published from 1978 through 1999 included authors who died between 1900 and 1960. The great poets, novelists, short story writers, playwrights, and philosophers of the period are frequently studied in high school and college literature courses. In organizing and reprinting the vast amount of critical material written on these authors, TCLC helps students develop valuable insight into literary history, promotes a better understanding of the texts, and sparks ideas for papers and assignments. Each entry in TCLC presents a comprehensive survey on an author’s career or an individual work of literature and provides the user with a multiplicity of interpretations and assessments. Such variety allows students to pursue their own interests; furthermore, it fosters an awareness that literature is dynamic and responsive to many different opinions.

Every fourth volume of TCLC is devoted to literary topics. These topics widen the focus of the series from the individual authors to such broader subjects as literary movements, prominent themes in twentieth-century literature, literary reaction to political and historical events, significant eras in literary history, prominent literary anniversaries, and the literatures of cultures that are often overlooked by English-speaking readers.

TCLC is designed as a companion series to Gale’s *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, (CLC) which reprints commentary on authors who died after 1999. Because of the different time periods under consideration, there is no duplication of material between CLC and TCLC.

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- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym is listed in the author heading and the author’s actual name is given in parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical information. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by a heading that consists of the most common form of the title in English translation (if applicable) and the name of its author.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose

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- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism. Source citations in the Literary Criticism Series follow University of Chicago Press style, as outlined in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 15th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003).
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A **Cumulative Author Index** lists all of the authors that appear in a wide variety of reference sources published by Gale, including *TCLC*. A complete list of these sources is found facing the first page of the Author Index. The index also includes birth and death dates and cross references between pseudonyms and actual names.

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In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Gale also produces a paperbound edition of the *TCLC* cumulative title index. This annual cumulation, which alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in the series, is available to all customers. Additional copies of this index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index; it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the next edition.

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Kuester, Martin. "Myth and Postmodernist Turn in Canadian Short Fiction: Sheila Watson, 'Antigone' (1959)." In *The Canadian Short Story: Interpretations*, edited by Reginald M. Nischik, pp. 163-74. Rochester, N.Y.: Camden House, 2007. Reprinted in *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*. Vol. 206, edited by Thomas J. Schoenberg and Lawrence J. Trudeau, 227-32. Detroit: Gale, 2008. The examples below follow recommendations for preparing a works cited list set forth in the Modern Language Association of America's *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, 7th ed. (New York: MLA, 2009. Print); the first example pertains to material drawn from periodicals, the second to material reprinted from books:

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Colombian Literature

This entry presents criticism of literary works by Colombian authors from the late nineteenth to the early twenty-first century.

INTRODUCTION

Colombian literature is deeply influenced by the country's history and politics, as well as by the heterogeneity and diversity of its population, which includes people of native Indian, European, and mixed ancestry. While its Indian culture had its own oral tradition, the first written texts to circulate and be published in Colombia appeared in the seventeenth century and, under the aegis of its colonial occupiers, included works that were mainly religious in character. Educational opportunities in the two succeeding centuries were extremely limited and reserved for upper-class males, but literary works influenced by continental Romanticism did begin to flourish, most often directed and censored by the Catholic Church; indeed, the first government-instituted Academy of Spanish Language on the American continent was founded in 1871 in Colombia. Literacy in general in Colombia was linked to social and economic stature, so that the *letrados*, people who could read and write, consisted of government officials, lawyers, politicians, journalists, and authors who lived in urban areas. As Corey Shouse Tourino has observed, "Nowhere in Latin America has the Lettered City been more influential and enduring than in Colombia, where men and women have occupied positions of enormous importance in national politics, and have done so in a more prolonged and systematic manner than their continental neighbors."

In the 1920s, the main style of literature in Colombia was *costumbrismo*, which was concerned with peasant life and customs, but also included censure of social and governmental policies. While it extolled the virtues of country life, this type of writing acknowledged, in addition, the exploitation of Colombian natural resources by foreign oil companies and the beginnings of civil strife in the form of labor strikes. The government's program encouraged movement away from agrarianism and traditionalism, however, and the literature of the period exhibits the sense of displacement that many people felt during this era. Such authors as Soledad Acosta, Elisa Mújica, and Juana Sanchez Lafaurie became interested in exploring the changing roles of women in this more modern society as opportunities for women began to expand. The 1940s and 1950s were

characterized by violent, military, and dictatorial governments, civil strife, and mass emigration as the more wealthy and educated fled the country. Alirio Díaz Guerra's novel *Lucas Guevara* (1914) is an account of one such early immigrant and his difficulties in the face of a foreign, consumerist, and sexually licentious culture.

While civil war and poverty continued in Colombia, the 1960s brought a boom in literary production and world attention for the works of such authors as Gabriel García Márquez and Laura Restrepo. The last three decades of the twentieth century were also marked by attention to subjects previously not treated in Colombian literature. Márquez's *Cien años de soledad* (1967; *One Hundred Years of Solitude*) incorporated a critique of colonial efforts to eradicate native cultures, languages, and religions in favor of white, European, and Catholic models. Other authors of the period touch on official government "whitening" attempts regarding Indians, and on legislatively-imposed policies intended to shame and denigrate mixed-race (*mestizo*) persons. The subsequent institutionalization of the concept of *mestizaje* is explored from a personal perspective by Manuel Zapata Olivella in his 1988 autobiography, *¡Levántate mulato!*. Decades of guerilla warfare, violence and crime perpetrated by the infamous drug cartels in Medellín and other cities scarred Colombian life and were echoed by its literature. Life under such conditions is documented by, for example, Fernando Vallejo in his novel *La virgen de los sicarios* (1994) and by director Víctor Gaviria in his screenplays *Rodrigo D.: No futuro* (1990) and *La vendedera de rosas* (1998).

Critics writing about Colombian literature have been especially interested in modern writers' reevaluations of the country's troubled past. Lorna Robinson has written about Márquez's attitude toward Colombia's past in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, and Lloyd Hughes Davis has discussed how Restrepo's *La novia oscura* (1999; *The Dark Bride*) comments on the colonial past and *mestizaje*. Jeff Browitt links sexual dysfunction with the immigration experience in Guerra's *Lucas Guevara*, and Ryan Long underscores the importance of truth and memory in Álvaro Mutos's prison writings. Carmina Navia Velasco, Maria Mercedes Andrade, and Myriam Osorio focus on the position of women in Colombian society as seen in its literature. Pointing out positive changes that have taken place in Colombian cities in the last couple of decades, Sandro R. Barros, Aleksandar Sasha Dundjerovic and Ilva Navarro Bateman, and Barnaby King [see Further Reading] offer evidence of the role that literature, film, and theater have played in social rehabilitation.

REPRESENTATIVE WORKS

Soledad Acosta

El corazón de la mujer, La flor del valle (novel) 1867

Diario íntimo (diary) 2004

Aldalucía Angel

Las andariegas (novel) 1984

Augusto Boal

Theater of the Oppressed (literary criticism) 1979

Magdalena Fety

María entre los muertos (novel) 1964

Víctor Gaviria

Rodrigo D.: No futuro (screenplay) 1990

La vendedera de rosas (screenplay) 1998

Alirio Díaz Guerra

Lucas Guevara (novel) 1914

Juana Sanchez Lafaurie

Viento de otoño [as Marzia de Lusignon] (novel) 1941

Gabriel García Márquez

Cien años de soledad [*One Hundred Years of Solitude*] (novel) 1967

El amor en los tiempos del cólera [*Love in the Time of Cholera*] (novel) 1985

Elisa Mújica

Los dos tiempos (novel) 1949

Álvaro Mutis

La muerte de estrategia (nonfiction) 1999

Laura Restrepo

La novia oscura [*The Dark Bride*] (novel) 1999

Evangelista Correa del Rincón Solís

Los emigrantes (novel) 1889

Fernando Vallejo

La virgen de los sicarios (novel) 1994

Felipe Vergara

Kilele (play) 2004

Manuel Zapata Olivella

¡Levántate mulato! (autobiography) 1988

COLONIALISM AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

Sandro R. Barros (essay date July 2006)

SOURCE: Barros, Sandro R. "Otherness as Dystopia: Space, Marginality, and Post-National Imagination in Fernando Vallejo's *La virgen de los sicarios*." *Ciberletras* 15 (July 2006): n.p.

[In the essay below, Barros explores Fernando Vallejo's depiction of the city of Medellín in his novel *La virgen de los sicarios* as a dystopic mirror image of the Colombian nation as a whole.]

The objective revisionism of the Colombian Establishment elaborated by Fernando Vallejo through his homonymous character in *La virgen de los sicarios* could be argued as a literary project in which the city comes to represent a point of departure for the novel's odious re-imagination of the national present. The disposition of the character of Fernando as a hateful entity whose corrosive criticism of the homeland re-emphasizes Colombia's stereotypical image as a site dominated by violence and social decay may be regarded, however, as a concealed declaration of affection.¹ Ultimately, the narrator's obsession with the national space reveals an apparent demonstration of concern and frustration derived from his disillusioned re-encounter with the city of his youth. Nevertheless, as subjective or transcendently poetic as Fernando's caustic prose may be when revising the *status quo* of the nation, the disparaging attacks against the Establishment take place precisely in the protagonist's reconsideration of the Colombian urban milieu. In *La virgen*, Medellín is depicted as the locale upon which the past is enunciated as a utopia and the present, Medellín, as Vallejo's onomatopoeic irony suggests, is eventually confronted and consummated as a dystopic reality. The authorial alter-ego's fixation with the national space, clearly manifested in the numerous accounts of the *sicariato* violence and the corruption of the ecclesiastical and political bodies, is intrinsically denotative of a textual gesture in which the narrator's (dis)affection for that which is contained within the urban realm serves as a sustained mirrored image of the Colombian nation as a whole.²

Indeed, the notion of the city representing the entirety of the nation corresponds to an abstraction insofar as the urban reality conveys a type of "fictional knowledge" that inherently proposes one's gaze upon its dense fabric as a type of totalizing experience (de Certeau 127).³ More than an ideal of cosmopolitanism, the universe contained in "one" space, the city signifies a discursive authority, for in the very realization of its "optical" knowledge, the very imaginary totalizations

produced by the gaze of its singularities, lies the key to its self-authentication, its ability to define the state of things in the illusion of plenitude.

A powerful act of imagination in itself, the city, more specifically the lettered city, has traditionally submitted to its referentiality the very process of thought, the very formation of centric and peripheral modes of national being.⁴ By reverting the perspective of the lettered city's account to the marginal gaze, the perambulations of Vallejo's protagonists through the chaotic space of Medellín suggest that the sanctioning aspect of the urban discourse be turned against itself in the definition of national identities. The act of re-imagining Medellín—and by default the nation—vis-à-vis the periphery implies the appropriation of the city's totalizing discourse. Thus falling prey to an outsider viewpoint, the conceptualization of the urban realm as a utopian ideal of civility, or conglomeration of differences "in agreement" is dismantled in *La virgen's* narrative in favor of the complete annihilation of its future. The city is not only denounced as a failed project of communal existence but it is also shown to be a space where its apparent diversity is ultimately exclusivist in principle.

If counter-utopian literature has commonly expressed a disenchanting pessimism towards the present by fictionalizing its condition in the remoteness of a future account (Kaplan 200), what the reader comes to realize in *La virgen* is that the author is actually pursuing the opposite of such a tenet.⁵ In Vallejo's text, the perception of the city as a degenerate likelihood is replaced by the actuality of Medellín's present, which consequentially places the novel in a singular position regarding the very status of dystopic narratives as prophetic visions.

As Néstor Canclini affirms, cities are not merely a physical phenomenon, a way in which individuals occupy a certain space. Cities also constitute locales with an inherited patrimony comprised of elements such as legends, histories, images and films that speak about and on behalf of their existence (*Imaginarios urbanos*, 93). Hence, the city itself can be considered a text to be arbitrarily interpreted, translated and recounted.

Personified as a malignant agent capable of easily disposing of its inhabitants, treating citizenship itself as a commodity, Medellín is (re)presented in *La virgen* as a Dantesque inferno where the marginal body is constantly depicted as a nomadic existence, spiritually exiled in its own space of origin.⁶

Throughout Fernando's and his *sicario* companions' pilgrimages, "Metrallo" is criticized for its ejection of those individuals who do not conform to concentric and pre-established models of citizenry imposed by the lettered city. The disenfranchised *sicarios* are portrayed as homeless entities, rejected by the very place that has

been customarily imagined as fostering difference (Bridge and Watson 11).⁷ Fernando's visit to Medellín's morgue in search of his second lover Wílmor vouches for the novel's denouncement of the city's dehumanization of marginal bodies. When seeing the multitude of nameless cadavers, victims of the random violence that has taken over the urban space of Medellín, the narrator comes to realize how analogous his experience is to that of a visit to a local butcher shop:

Los que sí están refrigerados son los N.N., o no identificados, que van a una cava o frigorífico desnudos, colgados de unos ganchos como reses por tres meses, al cabo de los cuales, si nadie los reclama, el Estado los entierra por su cuenta. El Estado, esto es, Colombia, la caritativa.

(120)

This ironic description of the nation "charitably" disposing of the unidentified bodies of its citizens emphasizes the extent of its disengagement as a political institution. The corpses that Fernando observes, hanging like pieces of meat in the morgue's refrigerator, are symbolically suggestive of the Establishment's treatment of *sicarios* as bestial entities. Moreover, the narrative shift from the first person to the third in this episode underscores the level of depersonalization with which Vallejo intends to characterize the senseless purpose of life in the urban context of Medellín. When referring to himself in the third person, the narrator reports:

Si en un principio, de entrada, el hombre invisible pensó, por su color translúcido, que los cadáveres de la sala de necropsias estaban refrigerados, después descubrió que no. No. Era la transparencia de la muerte.

(119)

The proposition of the body as a disposable commodity is advanced at both the physical and metaphysical levels. While Vallejo's narrator's sarcastic irony criticizes the urban locale as an abject space for the *sicario* existence, the author seeks to textually transcend its reality by formulating a discourse that reveals the idiosyncrasies and contradictions of the city as a poetic unreality. One example of this mode of discursive representation can be found in the narrator's arrival at one of Medellín's *comunas*. Upon reaching the top of a hill, Fernando and Alexis encounter a sign posted by local residents with the inscription "se prohíbe arrojar cadáveres" (46). Upon noticing the presence of a dead body amidst a pile of garbage nearby, the narrator, in his customary sardonic tone, notes the paradox present at the transgression of the authority implied by the posted message: "¿Se prohíbe? ¿Y esos gallinazos qué? ¿Que era entonces ese ir y venir de aves negras, brincando, aleteando, picoteándose, patrasándose para sacarle mejor las tripas al muerto?" (46).⁸ There is a conscious intent here of manifesting Medellín as the epitome of a

transcendental reality. The very presence of the sign's inscription "it is forbidden to throw cadavers" presupposes a paradoxical account, since the image of a body lying by its side contrasts with the value of the message contained in the writing. Also, Fernando's explanation of the decomposing body being eaten by vultures implies a transgression of the inscription's authority, which fundamentally underscores not only the *comuna* as a legislative organization distinct from the lettered city but also shows that Fernando's and Alexis' "surreal" experience corresponds, in fact, to the very quotidian reality of the *sicario* in his locale of origin. As the narrator affirms: "Surrealistas estúpidos! Pasaron por este mundo castos y puros sin entender nada de nada, ni de la vida ni del surrealismo. El pobre surrealismo se estrella en añicos contra la realidad de Colombia" (118). What Fernando signifies by suggesting the Colombian reality to be a surrealist paradigm is not necessarily the contemplation of the nation as an unreality but rather an ironic proposition that asserts the *sicario* space as an unknown territory. In other words, in the commentaries that emphasize the nation's extraordinary nature, Fernando ultimately reaffirms the place from which his discourse is effectively formulated.

Indeed, Fernando's observations throughout *La virgen's* narrative are particularly keen on drawing attention to the geographical separations existing between the *sicario* marginal sphere and the lettered city. The narrator-protagonist's assertion of Medellín as the combination of two cities under a single name indicates the scrutiny of the urban spatiality as the severance of two distinct universes: "Podríamos decir, para simplificar las cosas, que bajo un solo nombre Medellín son dos ciudades; la de abajo, intemporal, en el valle; y la de arriba, en las montañas, rodeándola. El abrazo de Judas" (82). However, in this explicit separation advocated by the narrator, the influx of bodies, that is, the dislocation of the marginal subject from the peripheral *comuna* to the lettered city—and the opposite—is purportedly unequal, for it is common to observe the *sicarios* infiltrating the space of the lettered city but not the contrary. Fernando's explanation of the *sicariato's* journey from the "espacio de arriba" to the "espacio de abajo" gives emphasis to the very impertinence of this class in defying the imaginary borders of the city. Simultaneously, the author underscores the *sicario* presence as a foreign body within the confinements of the urban milieu. Hence, the *comuna* is constantly emphasized as a space of isolation where the city itself disposes of its byproduct, namely the poverty and violence attributed to the *sicariato* culture:

La ciudad de abajo nunca sube a la ciudad de arriba pero lo contrario sí: los de arriba bajan, a vagar, a robar, a atracar, a matar. Quiero decir, bajan los que

quedan vivos, porque a la mayoría, allá arriba, allá mismo, tan cerquita de las nubes y del cielo, antes de que alcancen a bajar en su propio matadero los matan.

(82)

Exposed as an infectious locus, the *sicarios' comuna* is apprehended as a space of containment of poverty whose growth threatens the very existence of the utopian ideal of the city. As Fernando recounts, the situation of warfare between rival groups of *sicarios* is ultimately transferred beyond their original domain; it invades the lettered city in its most quotidian occurrences:

Se estaban dando plomo a loco estos dos combos por cuestiones "territoriales," como decían antes los biólogos y como dicen ahora los sociólogos. Dos bandas de la comuna noriental, que como su nombre indica está en el Norte, agarradas de la greña en Sabaneta, que está en el Sur, en el otro extremo? Sabaneta goza de extraterritorialidad, amigos, y aquí no me vengán a dirimir sus querellas de barrio: esto es mar abierto para todos los tiburones.

(50-51)

As *La virgen's* narrator asserts, the genesis of the *sicariato's* Medellín, the "Medellín de arriba," must be understood as a site of marginalization instigated by the very agency of its counterpart, the "Medellín de abajo." This becomes patently obvious when Fernando briefly accounts for the so-called "La violencia" period in Colombian history—roughly from 1948 to 1958—in which the political dispute between the Liberal and Conservative parties led the country into a perennial state of insurrection and criminality.⁹ In one of his customary digressions, Fernando retells the *comunidades* as a developing occurrence whose foundations are settled in the country's historical territorial disputes:

Cuánto hace que se murieron los viejos, que se mataron de jóvenes, unos con otros a machete . . . A machete, con los que trajeron del campo cuando llegaron huyendo dizque de "la violencia" y fundaron estas comunas sobre terrenos ajenos, robándoselos como barrios piratas o de invasión.

(83)

As can be noted, the *sicariato* existence is reviewed in conjunction with the historical nation. The inclusion of the *sicario* as a subject who evolves out of the conflict of Medellín's marginality suggests that violence be appreciated as one of the many facets that make up the nation's identity. As Vallejo explains the story of the two Medellín's, the author places in evidence a message of abandonment and exclusion that leads the reader to reflect on the responsibilities of the lettered city for the situation one encounters in the "city above:"

Y que hace Medellín por Metrallo? Nada, canchas de fútbol en terraplanes elevados, excavados en la

montaña, con muy bonita vista (nosotros), panorámica, para que jueguen fútbol todo el día y se acuesten cansados y ya no piensen en matar ni en la cópula.

(84-85)

Within a critical reflection that stresses the urban utopia as an elusive concept, Vallejo ratifies Medellín as a legendary city. The author articulates the urban spatiality as a fabulous myth apprehended as the "sum of all signs", as Roland Barthes would have it (144), a global representation of the nation in a degenerative state. Thus, the re-appropriation of the topos of violence and its re-incidence throughout the novel revise the Colombian context as an emblematic territory whose first cognitive identification communicates social chaos and violence as a type of inherent identity.

As Vallejo introduces human brutality as an everyday account, at times appealing to its current "banality" to reaffirm the city's dystopic quality, Medellín becomes suggestively uttered, in Bakhtinian terms, as a chronotope of the contemporary Third World city, a space marked by poverty, hybridity and heterogeneity in disparate and unequal levels.¹⁰ The author's negative reiteration of Medellín as a collapsed urban project reveals a subversive mode of celebrating Colombian nationality that appropriates the very process through which the nation has been traditionally imagined. Nevertheless, instead of focusing on the positive attributes that express a cohesive form of national identity and solidarity—as Benedict Anderson has suggested regarding the consolidation of the European bourgeoisie—Vallejo's narrative repossesses a national cultural imagery that is essentially negative (Anderson 145).¹¹ This becomes evident, for instance, when the author links Medellín and its *sicariato* culture to the figure of Pablo Escobar, a name that has come to be understood as a synonym for Colombia and the drug traffic underworld:

Con la muerte del presunto traficante, aquí [Medellín] la profesión de sicario se acabó . . . Sin trabajo fijo, se dispersaron por la ciudad y se pusieron a secuestrar, a atracar, a robar. Y sicario que trabaja por su cuenta y riesgo ya no es sicario: es libre empresa, la iniciativa privada. Otra institución nuestra que se nos va. El naufragio de Colombia, en esta pérdida de nuestra identidad ya no nos va quedando nada.

(34)

Vallejo's reinstatement of the *sicario* as a subverted type of entrepreneurship contributes to the sustaining of Medellín's identity as a site of social corruptibility, while proposing, rather ironically, that the *sicariato* lifestyle be recognized as a profession. Furthermore, Vallejo's implication of the *sicariato* activities in conjunction with Escobar suggests the young assassins' representation be contextually inserted in an economic model that purports the nation's drug-related activities as a degenerate type of Third World capitalism. How-

ever, Vallejo's ironic critical appreciation of the *sicariato*'s engagement in society's marginal economies does not lose sight of the fact that their line of work constitutes a last resort, since this social class is unable to engage in licit forms of capitalism as a means to ensure its own survival:

Muerto el gran contratador de sicarios [Pablo Escobar], mi pobre Alexis de quedó sin trabajó. Fue entonces cuando lo conocí. Por eso los acontecimientos nacionales están ligados a los personales, y las pobres, ramplo-nas vidas de los humildes tramadas con las de los grandes.

(61)

If on the one hand Fernando affirms in the aforementioned fragment that national events are connected to personal and individual circumstances, on the other hand the narrator is particularly keen on stressing the arbitrariness with which the historical nation remembers and forgets its own past and sense of identity.¹² Fernando's critical stance on the collective imaginary of the nation predicates his exilic Self to be someone whose memory of the past is capable of acting as a supplementary force of historical representation: "Señor procurador: Yo soy la memoria de Colombia y su conciencia y después de mi no sigue nada" (21).

The former exiled narrator reveals himself as an entity that, through his apparent distance from the nation's reality, is able to better confront the true nature of its progress; his life-account is advanced as a corrective measure that elevates remembrance to a condition of authenticity where history is concerned. In Fernando's contrast between the present of the nation and his memories, the disfigured now becomes an event of historical proportions, for ultimately the narrator recognizes the past and its conventional narratives to be relative commonalities:

La fugacidad de la vida humana a mi no me inquieta; me inquieta la fugacidad de la muerte: esta prisa que tienen aquí para olvidar. El muerto más importante lo borra un partido de fútbol. Así, de partido en partido se está liquidando la memoria.

(39)

As can be noted in the aforementioned excerpt, *La virgen*'s narrative trivializes the national past inasmuch as it reinforces its corruptibility in the present. Vallejo's scrutiny of Medellín's modernity sees globalization as a type of ideological violence in which existence is relinquished in favor of transnational capital demands. The author also revises the contemporary global nation as a locus where the disavowal of traditional identities constitutes a mandate within the circumstances promoted by the economic initiatives of the new world order. Earlier in the narrative, Fernando criticizes the origin of the *sicarios*' names and unprivileged individuals alike.

thus manifesting internationalism as a paradigm after which local identities are negotiated. Observing that the *sicarios'* names are in their vast majority foreign, especially Anglo-American based, the narrator states:

Con eso de que les dio a los pobres por ponerles a los hijos nombres de ricos, extravagantes, extranjeros: Tayson Alexander, por ejemplo, o Fáber o Eder o Wilfer o Rommel o Yeison o que sé yo . . . Es lo único que les pueden dar para arrancar en esta mísera vida a sus niños, un vano, un necio nombre extranjero o inventado, de relumbrón.

(8-9)

A postmodern sense of hybridization can be contemplated influencing the formation of one of the most basic forms of identity articulation, that is, one's given name (Canclini, 263-322). The Anglo-American patrimony, whether or not expressed in the hybridization of proper names or material commodities, is purported in the novel as a distinguishable referential by which global identities are devised, for it is in the consumption of the so-called First World cultural production that the symbolic value of particular influences is asserted.¹³ The transnational postmodern context that embraces Medellín is thus implicated as an "in-between" (Bhabha, 59-60) stage in which archaism—represented by Fernando's memory and his self-assertion as the representative of a particular past tradition—and modernity—implied by the *sicario's* incorporation into the contemporary "worldly" context of Medellín—converge in the author's conscious representation of the reality of globalization in Latin America.

The signs of contemporary consumerism are vehemently criticized in Vallejo's revision of Medellín as the narrator Fernando comments about their effects on the behavioral attitudes of his *sicario* companions: "Impulsado por su vacío existencial Alexis agarra en el televisor cualquier cosa: telenovelas, partidos de fútbol, conjuntos de rock, una puta declarando, el presidente" (33). While the *sicarios'* wishes for material possessions are communicated to the reader as an "existential emptiness," Vallejo does not conceal those symbols that have come to constitute the enunciation of a global condition where market ideals and individual aspirations are manifested as a single interdependent desire:

Con su letra atravesada y mi bolígrafo escribió: Que quería unos tennis marca Reebok y unos jeans Paco Ravanne. Camisas Ocean Pacific y ropa interior Calvin Klein. Una moto Honda, un jeep Mazda, un equipo de sonido laser y una nevera para la mamá: uno de esos refrigeradores marca Whirlpool que soltaban chorros de cubitos de hielo abriéndoles simplemente una llave.

(91)

The textual affirmation of the current global context in *La virgen* denounces the present neo-liberal ideology as a corrosive force that is capable of consuming itself in-

sofar as it promotes human existence as a synonym of consumption. In Fernando's commentary cited above, Vallejo reveals a critical appreciation of the Colombian reality that exposes the paradoxical idiosyncrasies of the new world order: the marginalized subject is revealed as an agent that licitly or illicitly participates in the nation's economy while simultaneously being exposed as a type of "disposable" entity whose struggle for survival and sense of identity is caught between the entrance and exit from the peripheral city, the "buying" and the rejection of the models of identity proposed by the metropolis (Bernal 65-6). Since the *sicarios* of Vallejo's novel are portrayed as having the same aspirations as those individuals belonging to higher social classes, the equality of their humanity is disclosed, which essentially constitutes the text's most subversive theme: the proclamation of the Other's "sameness." In other words, in spite of the clear demarcation of the *sicario's* excluded existence on the peripheries of society, the marginalized Other is normatively proposed as an agent capable of contesting with the cultural Establishment on the very terms of its exclusion. It suffices to mention here the emergence of the *sicario* as a "profession" whose conduct obeys, in principle, the same contractual and capital logic of legitimate types of businesses.

Thus the *sicariato's* status as an underprivileged class comes to be revised in Vallejo's novel as a paradox where the agency of poverty is concerned, for the reader sees through Fernando's narrative that the *sicarios'* line of work constitutes, in fact, an entrepreneurial initiative that is capable of challenging the lettered city's "common sense;" and it does so by defying the Establishment's own rules either in terms of cultural integrity and tradition—as the *sicariato's* veneration for the Virgin of Sabaneta is able to confirm—or in terms of the very models of economy the nation adopts. Vallejo's revision of poverty through the *sicarios'* perspective, more than constituting a paradox of action and alienation, social marginality and visibility, is cogitated as an element of the Colombian identity whose self-regenerative condition is seen as a tradition: "La pobreza se autogenera multiplicada por dichas cifras y después, cuando agarra fuerza, se propaga como un incendio en progresión geométrica" (68).

The authorial message of poverty as a tradition within the historical nation is particularly noticeable in one of *La virgen's* accounts in which Fernando encounters Alexis' mother after the *sicario's* death. When the narrator sees his former companion's mother, he is instantly reminded of a poor old maid who used to serve at his home:

Pensé en . . . una sirvienta de mi casa, que me la recordaba. Evidentemente, aquella lejana mujer, que por la edad podría haber sido mi madre, no era la que tenía enfrente, que podía ser mi hija . . . ¿Sería que por sobre el abismo del tiempo se repetían las personas, los destinos?

(86)

Pondering the possibility of Alexis' mother to be related to his old servant, the narrator acknowledges misery as an atemporal circumstance, a social facet of the nation that unequivocally masks individuality under the stigma of destitution. Furthermore, when stating that the "abyss of time" repeats destinies as well as the presence of individuals in one's life, Fernando also implicates memory as a corrupted way of accounting for the past. And it is precisely in the recognition of the past as an imperfect and aleatory construction that the author asserts the story of his partially autobiographical protagonist as a type of historicity, seeking to destabilize traditional historical discourses on the premises of the novel's ambiguity as fiction and one's subjectivity in the account of history. This tenet is particularly evident in one of Fernando's many digressions in which he reports on his attendance at the funeral of an old acquaintance by the name of El Ñato. As the narrative goes, when receiving the news of his acquaintance's death, Fernando reacts with perplexity for, as he remembered, El Ñato had been dead for thirty years, murdered in the exact same conditions of which he was now being informed: "Me despedí . . . a la vez inquieto por la perspectiva insidiosa de que El Ñato, y en general al ser humano . . . lo pudieron matar dos veces" (107). Upon arriving at the funeral, the narrator realizes that the defunct was, indeed, the person he judged to be deceased decades ago, which leads him to inquire: "¿No sería que la realidad de Medellín se enloqueció y se estaba repitiendo?" (109).

Fernando's depiction of reality repeating itself could be reviewed either as a poetic instance or as a rhetorical principle of relating the past as a deficient memorial construct.¹⁴ In either case, what prevails in Vallejo's text is the obsessive accountability of the present based on the introspective subjectivity of the narrator's recollections. Through Fernando's perspective, the historical nation is contemplated in its undoing, consequentially revealing *La virgen's* discourse as a type of criticism directed towards the paradigms of post-modern ideology.

Yet, in its dystopic review of the present of the nation from a marginal viewpoint, Vallejo's narrative does not invoke any form of marginal resistance or promote solutions for the de-marginalization of the *sicariato* existence. In effect, the *sicarios'* reality is promoted as a self-destructive and self-regenerative condition that is pessimistically articulated as one of the symptoms of the nation in its very fundamental disintegration. *La virgen's* contextual utterance of Medellín as a space in decay recognizes the current global milieu as the erasure of humanist principles. In this sense, Vallejo ironically postulates "inexistence" as the rationale for the twenty-first century: "Pobres seres inocentes, sacados sin motivo de la nada y lanzados en el vértigo del tiempo. Por unos necios, enloquecidos instantes nada más" (121).

Fernando's last words "y que te vaya bien, que te pise un carro / o que te estripe un tren" (121) underscores such a nihilist principle of expressing the contemporary culture, which further emphasizes *La virgen's* critical revision of the nation as a frail and elusive concept.¹⁵ The postmodern logic of centric annihilation thus defeats historical indoctrination, which inevitably purports humanity as an existence adrift: "Bueno parcero, aquí nos separamos, hasta aquí me acompaña usted, por su lado, su camino que yo me sigo en cualquiera de estos buses para donde vaya, para donde sea" (121).

Notes

1. Indeed, the topos of violence appears as a commonality in the contemporary realm of Colombia's literary production. For example, a search on Colombian fictional literature in the *MLA Bibliography* yields 32 articles that directly deal with the thematic of social violence. Laura Restrepo, Fernando Vallejo, Gabriel García Márquez, Alonso Salazar, among others, are but a few of the contemporary authors whose works are directly concerned with the historical significance of violence in the Colombian social milieu.
2. For the role of the city in the collective imaginary of the nation, see De Certeau, "Walking the city" esp. 127.
3. Vallejo's discourse presents a "panoramic" narrative of the city, suggesting the narrator as a "voyeur" of the urban reality, according to De Certeau's understanding of the term: "Las comunas son, como he dicho, tremendas . . . casas y casas y casas, feas, feas, feas, encaramadas obscenamente las unas sobre las otras, ensordeciéndose con sus radios, día y noche, noche y día a ver cuál puede más, tronando en cada casa, en cada cuarto, desgañitándose en vellenatos y partidos de fútbol, música, salsa y rock, sin parar la carraca" (56).
4. The reference here to the "lettered city" departs from Benedict Anderson's analysis on the emergence of print capitalism and its role in the shaping of national identities. Anderson argues that 19th century print capitalism constituted a type of discursive power that diffusely asserted that which was to be included or excluded in the process of imagining the modern nation. See *Imagined Communities*, esp. 45.
5. As Carter Kaplan observes: "Dystopia uses fiction to portray institutions based on intellectual mythology and essays prophecy and prognostication" (200).
6. For an analysis of *La virgen* as a parodic version of Dante's *Inferno* see L'Hoeste, *La virgen de los sicarios o las visiones dantescas de Fernando Vallejo* 757-67.

7. As Bridge and Watson note on the characteristics of the city as a site of diverse imaginary projections: "Clearly for people living outside of conventional norms, such as gays or single women, or for those seeking to break the bonds of earlier ties, the city can represent a space of liberation . . . [it] operate[s] as a site of fantasy. So also subjectivities are constructed in the spaces (both formal and intersitial, imagined and real) of the city and certain kinds of feelings or a sense of self are made possible, and we remember these as emerging in a particular site" (11).
8. In this passage, the narrator also underscores the notion of the city as a malignant collective upon stating that the agent responsible for the dead body was, in actuality, Medellín: "Dije arriba que no sabía quién mató al vivo, pero sí sé: un asesino omnipresente de psiquis tenebrosa y de incontables cabezas: Medellín, también conocido por los alias de Medallo y de Metrallo lo mató" (46).
9. For a historical analysis of bipartisan conflicts and violence in Colombian politics see Rojas, *Civilization and Violence*.
10. Mikhail Bakhtin characterizes chronotope as "the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" (*The Dialogic Imagination*, 84). This idea seems to somewhat coincide with Barthes' conceptualization of myths, which are essentially "a sum of signs, a global sign, the final term of a first semiological chain" (*Mythologies*, 114).
11. See Anderson 83-112.
12. For the conditionality of history as a discourse of power that is intrinsically subjected to the memorial account of "the memory of the hero or of the victim", see Walcott 371.
13. In *Consumers and Citizens*, Canclini observes that culture has become "a process of multinational assemblage, a flexible articulation of parts, a montage of features that any citizen in any country, of whatever religion or ideology, can read and use" (17-8). Although Canclini's remarks on the current global symbolic economy are insightful, it is necessary not to lose sight of an inherited sense of ambivalence towards cultural authenticity and "inferiority" that still lingers on the Latin American culture as a consequence of its postcolonial past, which certainly exerts a strong influence in the shaping of identities where the use of the so-called First World culture (in particular the United States) as a referential is concerned.
14. As Fernando affirms elsewhere in the narrative: "El tiempo barre con todo y las costumbres. Así, de cambio en cambio, paso a paso, van perdiendo las sociedades la cohesión, la identidad, y quedan hechas unas colchas deshilachadas de retazos" (30).
15. For a reading of Vallejo's novel as a parody of Nietzschean nihilism, see Serra, "La virgen de los sicarios de Fernando Vallejo: testimonio paródico y discurso nietzscheano" 65-76.

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