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Gazing Backwards in Fernando Vallejo

Juanita Cristina Aristizábal

The Catholic University of America

Fernando Vallejo is one of Latin America's most acclaimed writers, and also one of its most polemical. Vallejo, who was born in Medellín and has been living and writing in Mexico since the 1970's, has become an important presence in Latin American fiction. In addition to 11 novels, he has also written three biographies, numerous eccentric essays on topics ranging from religion to physics, edited several volumes of poetry and correspondence, and published a treatise on what he calls literature's grammar.¹ He has also become a popular speaker, appearing at literary conferences and book fairs—often accompanied by a pack of street dogs—to accept prestigious awards or to give controversial speeches in which he

¹ Vallejo has published the following novels. *El fuego secreto* (1986), *Los caminos a Roma* (1988), *Años de indulgencia* (1989) and *Entre fantasmas* (1993) were published in a volume entitled *El río del tiempo* (1998). *La Virgen de los sicarios* (1994), *El desbarrancadero* (2001), *La rambla paralela* (2002), *Mi hermano el alcalde* (2004) and *El don de la vida* (2010). The titles of his biographies of Porfirio Barba Jacob, José Asunción Silva and Rufino José Cuervo are: *El Mensajero* (1984), *Almas en pena, chapolas negras* (1985) and *El cuervo blanco* (2012). His treatise on literature's grammar is entitled *Logoi. Una gramática del lenguaje literario* (1983).

advocates for animal rights and rants about the failures of the Catholic Church, the horrors of overpopulation and the stupidity of soccer matches.

The narrator that Vallejo has created for his novels is just as peculiar as the public authorial persona that he has devised for himself. The narrator is a nostalgic old man that aimlessly strolls European and Latin American cities and small towns, bearing witness to the geopolitical transformations that have radically transformed the idealized notion he holds of his country and hometown.

A writer himself named Fernando, the narrator is caught in a set of interactions with late 20th century decaying urban landscapes. Fernando responds to these interactions with harsh and oftentimes inappropriate diatribes against politicians, religious institutions, democracy, mass media and popular culture, among many others.² A jaded old man, Fernando indulges in misogynistic, elitist and at times even racist discourse, including rants against modern egalitarian values. This aggressive discourse is so candid and shocking as to make Vallejo seem an odd presence among the generation of '72. Vallejo seems far from being one of his contemporaries who often reacted to oppressive regimes and the rise of neoliberalism in late 20th century Latin America by turning to a socially committed literature.

In a time marked by a return to the concern for ethics in the arts, in which we are the beneficiaries of half a century of feminist discourse questioning patriarchy, and in which we discuss and rightly celebrate the culture of minorities and other traditionally marginalized groups, what are we to make of Vallejo's display of a discourse that can easily be labeled as

² This type of discourse is, of course, disconcerting in and of itself, but it is particularly challenging because of the uncanny resemblances that exist between author and narrator. Although the resonances between Vallejo and Fernando suggest an autobiographical connection, Vallejo affirms the fictional nature of his narrator. The author has often declared that the many traits he shares with Fernando—they were both born and raised in Medellín, both are gay, failed filmmakers, animal lovers, obsessed with grammatical correctness, exiles in Mexico and highly disdainful, cynical and at the same time nostalgic about everything Colombian—are irrelevant. He further distances himself from Fernando by killing him off, not once but twice. For a recent interview where Vallejo discusses his narrator see Brantley Nicholson, "Entrevista a Fernando Vallejo." *Chasqui* 40.2 (2011).

anti-modern? And more problematic perhaps, of his commitment to this discourse through a seemingly autobiographical narrator?³

In *Entre fantasmas* (1993), the narrator suggests an angle from which to approach Vallejo's writings when he proudly declares his own outdated preferences: "Anacrónico como siempre he sido, siempre a la trasantepenúltima moda, añorando un tango, muero como un jacobino. De heterodoxia"(587). This relentless return to previous times and spaces is characteristic of Vallejo's narrative, which looks back with particular insistence to the discourses that shaped cultural production at the turn of the 20th century such as secularization, individualism, commoditization, urbanization and democratization. The dialogue that Vallejo establishes with these discourses throughout his writing points to his links to the Spanish American *modernistas*, a generation of writers between the 1880's and the 1920's considered foundational to Spanish American literature and culture. Vallejo's dialogue with this generation signals his affinity with decadence, a polemical discourse within the *modernista* movement and one tightly embraced by his narrator. Fernando is, in fact, shaped in the fashion of a contemporary decadent dandy, a nostalgic iconoclast in constant despair because of the state in which he finds his hometown and his country at the turn of the 21st century.

Fixing his gaze backwards often puts Vallejo's dandy at odds with the present, his insistent anachronism necessarily making him a contentious figure. My approach to Vallejo will show how his gaze backwards to preceding cultural and literary traditions makes him an odd figure in the generation of '72. His recurring dandy narrator, a heterodox, overpowering and erudite authorial voice, highly disdainful of popular culture and imbued with longing for the nation, clearly sets Vallejo's work against the grain of late 20th century Latin American cultural production. At the same time, through his ironic adaptation of this caricatured *fin de siècle* character, Vallejo's literary project articulates one of the most

³ As Jean Franco pointed out, while it may be evident that irony cuts across the misogynistic and at times even racist comments articulated by Fernando as a *letrado*, confronting the narrator's aggressive and polemic rhetoric in *La Virgen los sicarios* is an unsettling experience for the reader: "As a *letrado*, he is 'our' ally 'mon semblable, mon frère.' The question is whether he is deliberately forcing us to face the 'fascist within' or whether he expects our complicity" (Franco 225).

intriguing testimonies of the unease with which, as Brantley Nicholson and Sophia McClennen argue in this special issue, the generation of Latin America's forced global citizens experienced the failures of cosmopolitan modernity at the turn of the 21st century.

I.

Vallejo's backwards gaze is perhaps most superficially apparent in his narrator's incessant dialogue with images and discourses rooted in Latin America's cultural traditions. In addition to weaving into almost every patch of his writing words and images from the Catholic tradition, Vallejo's writing has a strong relationship with a discourse that dates to the arrival of the Spanish in the Americas: grammar.

Language is one of the many elements in contemporary society that Vallejo identifies as facing corruption and decay. "El hombre", his narrator states in *Entre fantasmas*, "descubrió en la palabra lo más noble que tenía ...lo que lo distinguía de los animales...y la devaluó, la volvió mierda. Por eso yo digo tantas palabrotas... La palabra se ha vaciado de sentido y explota como una pompa de jabón." (*Entre fantasmas* 586)⁴ As can be seen from this passage, Fernando laments the devaluation and corruption of Spanish, marking himself as heir to that tradition of grammarians to which the Chilean Andrés Bello belonged, along with the Colombians Rufino José Cuervo and Miguel Antonio Caro. Indeed, he often calls himself "Colombia's last grammarian."⁵

Indicative of the importance that looking backwards has in Vallejo's literary project is the fact that his heterodox and iconoclastic narrator declares himself the last representative of an old tradition instead of the pioneer of a new one. The mere act of looking back makes Vallejo an atypical writer. Julio Ortega has referred to the impossibility of reading contemporary Latin American fiction retrospectively because of what he

⁴ Vallejo frequently comments on his preoccupation with language and animal rights. In one of his eccentric speeches entitled "El lejano país de Rufino José Cuervo" he stated: "El idioma está tan indefenso como los animales. Todos los atropellan con impunidad. Y esas dos causas perdidas son las que he tomado como mías, por el gusto de perder" (5).

⁵ His most recent book entitled *El cuervo blanco* is a biography of Rufino José Cuervo, Colombia's most renowned 19th century grammarian, admired by Vallejo and whose life and work he had been studying for many years.

called its loss of its “estatuto normativo, su índole disciplinaria prefijada, su familia de imágenes retrazable” (30). But Vallejo’s work is constituted from the retrospective point of view; under his persistent backwards gaze, the limits of Ortega’s proscription are clear. Echoing Ortega, Josefina Ludmer talks about the task of approaching contemporary culture as an operation of “reading the mystery of the present.” According to Ludmer, “para poder especular hoy desde aquí necesitamos un aparato diferente al que usábamos antes. Otras palabras y categorías para pensar los regímenes de significación y las políticas de la ciudad naturalizada de América Latina.” (138) Mary Louise Pratt has also referred to that elusive present as generating what she calls a trope in Latin American literature of the global era: “imágenes alegóricas de sistemas epistemológicos que el protagonista reconoce, pero que es incapaz de descifrar” (Pratt 272).

Vallejo’s narrator, however, refuses to abandon familiar words, categories and epistemological systems in favor of something new and unique to the present. An obvious example is his obsession with the nation, an obsession that may be symptomatic of his belonging to a generation described by the editors of this issue as one forced into global citizenship at the not so comfortable phase of incipient globalization.

One of the characteristic aspects of the global era is the emergence of identities and literatures detached from the boundaries traced by the nations that were imagined and imposed in the 19th century. José Joaquín Brunner has referred to an “international character,” and a “deterritorialization,” as the cultural tendencies in a context in which the nation state can no longer mobilize or organize the cultural field (64). According to Román de la Campa, in the society of global capitalism, collective identities opposed to the expansionist drive of free global markets—such as the nation—are anachronistic (305). De la Campa speaks of “indeterminacy” as a global condition that shapes cultural production, and that is characteristic of what he calls “a crisis of the national.” Along the same lines, Ludmer states that literature is no longer the manifestation of a national identity but a locus for other subjectivities and politics. And Sergio Echevarría speaks about “internationalism” as a trait of late 19th century cultural and literary vision.

It is common to see young Latin American writers, and also writers from the generation of '72, setting their novels in foreign countries. This internationalism is mostly a characteristic of the writers that proclaim themselves as members of the *McOndo* generation. In the prologue to the collection that serves as that generation's manifesto, Alberto Fuguet and Sergio Gómez declare that: "...lo que se escribe hoy en el gran país McOndo, con temas y estilos variados, [es] mucho más cercano al concepto de aldea global o mega red" (15). According to Fuguet and Gómez, in the context of the global world Latin American writers do not feel they are the representatives of any ideology or even of their own countries: instead they have broken their ties with Macondo and exchanged the topic of the Latin American identity for the topic of personal identity (13). More recently Jorge Volpi spoke about what he calls the "universality" of the new generation of Latin American writers. According to Volpi they are not striving to preserve the parameters of national literature and they do not hesitate to find foreign settings and stories. These writers, Volpi says, are "universal" and approach the idea of Latin America without "el tono salvífico o politizado de algunos de sus predecesores...sin resabios de romanticismo o de compromiso político, sin esperanzas ni planes de futuro" (170).

Yet Vallejo's fixation with Colombia is in clear opposition to this shift. In Vallejo's writing the tension between the local and the global, always at play in a generation working between national and post-national aesthetics, results in an obsessive return to his homeland.

Colombia is deeply embedded in his work even when he is writing from exile in Mexico and narrating Fernando's strolls through streets of cosmopolitan centers such as Barcelona, Rome, New York, London or Paris. Vallejo laments the fate of his beloved Colombia, which he describes as a languid country that has fallen victim to bloodshed, and has been sacked by oil barons and politicians, bribed by drug lords and blown up by guerrillas. At other times he is outraged by his nation, calling it the land of a "iraza tarada" con "alma de periferia!" and identifying it as a poor country rich in hate, a nation of assassins where mini-Uzis have replaced machetes. Fernando's obsession with Colombia, an obsession that is also pervasive in

Vallejo's own speeches and public appearances, appears out of place in today's globalized world.

Vallejo's work is also in conflict with some of the important characteristics of the literature of the postboom that literary scholars and critics have identified, characteristics that mark precisely the break between the writers discussed in this issue and the boom authors that precede them. One such characteristic is the predominance of personal and everyday narratives in contemporary literature. These narratives left behind the *grand récits* articulated by the "total novels" of the boom that intended to provide keys for the interpretation of national and continental realities and identities in Latin America. A second feature of the novels of the postboom is that they seek to erode the notion of the author or the narrator as a godlike or demiurgical figure in total control of his or her text.⁶ These characteristics of course hardly describe Vallejo's work. Far from providing keys for interpreting Colombia, Vallejo's sole purpose in his novels seems to be to attack it. Nevertheless, one of the most quoted passages of *La Virgen de los sicarios* suggests that Vallejo's writing does aspire to transcend the level of personal memory and reach the collective: "Yo soy la memoria de Colombia y su conciencia y después de mí no sigue nada" (21).

And if what his narrative purports to be is the memory of Colombia, then it is a memory trapped almost entirely in Fernando's monologue, a discourse in which the reader will only occasionally hear other voices. In opposition to the contemporary notion of the erosion of the control of the authorial figure, Fernando dominates Vallejo's novels in an overarching way. The narrator often claims ownership and domain over the world that he creates in his text and that, very much in the fashion of a decadent dandy, he dominates from a high tower. As he puts it in the following passage of *El fuego secreto* (1987): "Desde mi alta torre, mi atalaya viendo pasar las nubes domino el tiempo, domino el mundo... Sepan tan sólo que

⁶In his *The Voice of the Masters: Writing and Authority in Modern Latin American Literature* and *La ruta de Severo Sarduy* Roberto González Echevarría refers to the post-boom's deconstruction of "the power of the self." According to this critic this "power" supported the literary ideology behind the novels of the boom, which aspired to be "total" and assumed that "a certain knowledge of Latin America must be sought through its literature" (*The voice* 84).

si se me antoja y quiero rompo la reja y salgo por la ventana y deajo este encierro y bajo por un lazo que me hago con hilos de recuerdos.” (276)

Fernando is determined to dominate his text and at times reveals himself to be much closer to the *modernista* search for linguistic transcendence or to the boom’s “totalizing” perspective than to the everyday narratives of his generation. In the following fragment, for instance, he goes as far as to declare himself the only “truth” and “reason”, an almighty voice that does and undoes arbitrarily:

¿Qué me dicen? ¿Qué me niegan? Yo soy la única verdad, la única razón. Y la suave brisa se fue volviendo viento y el viento huracán y se lo fue llevando todo, los sombreros de los transeúntes, los paraguas de las señoras, las mitras de los obispos, el solideo del cardenal y las torres de las iglesias y los techos de las casas y, ratas, perros cerdos, hijos de la gran puta, el protagonista de mi propia vida empecé a ser yo. (*El fuego secreto* 181)

As “the protagonist of his own life,” the old man’s tales jump erratically following his memory-string. In accordance with the strong self-affirmation expressed in this passage, the old man fashions himself in ways that resemble that cult of personality characteristic of the pose of the decadent dandy. This is a feature of his narrative related to his transgression of another postboom trend: the democratization of literary discourse. Aníbal González has identified this phenomenon as the result of the rapid growth of the reading public in Latin America starting in the late 1970’s, and writers’ concomitant desire to produce more accessible and readable works (*Love and politics* 5).

Readability and accessibility are not necessarily traits embraced by Vallejo. In addition to his lack of chapters and erratic and abrupt jumps in space and time, Vallejo’s narrator is extremely, almost comically, erudite, full of eclectic and at times quite arcane references to science, history, literature, art and music. He presents himself as a polyglot who wants to know everything that there is to know—from the Icelandic and ural-altaic languages to the glucosecycle, atomic orbits and the mechanics of the magnetron (*Los días azules* 130).

All this erudition is typical of the dandy’s desire to distance himself from the “rest.” It also marks a clear connection between Vallejo and the turn of the 20th century when, for both Latin American and European

writers, a penchant for the erudite and the arcane was related to a desire to make art both a medium for the creation of a new aristocracy outside the social conventions of money and labor, and a substitute for religion in response to secularization and positivism.⁷ Vallejo's erudition may not make his work accessible only to a small reading public, but it does maintain a level of discourses and codes that are shared by a restricted elite of readers, negating today's democratization of literature and culture.

This erudition is only one of the antediluvian aspects of Vallejo's narrator that appears to draw on *modernista* discourses and images. Many other connections between his writing and the *modernistas*, such as Fernando's dialogue with secularization and the death of God through a sacrilegious proliferation of religious topics and imagery, attest to what critics have recognized as *modernismo's* lasting impact in Spanish America in the 20th century.⁸ But, ever the dandy, Vallejo invokes the *modernista* tradition in ways that break with the dialogue with *modernismo* undertaken by other writers from the mid 20th century to the present. For instance, as Aníbal González has argued, *modernismo* reappears in the writing of Miguel Barnett, Guillermo Cabrera Infante, Severo Sarduy or Luis Rafael Sánchez through the filter of popular culture, in particular through the genres of popular music, such as bolero, on which the movement had a significant and lasting impact (137).

The issue of popular culture is fundamental to understating the work of writers from the Generation of '72, as they are pioneers in

⁷ Many critics have studied the peculiarities of this process in the *modernista* context. See for example Ángel Rama, *Las máscaras democráticas del modernismo* (Montevideo: Fundación Ángel Rama, 1985); Graciela Montaldo, *Sensibilidad amenazada: Tendencias del modernismo latinoamericano* (Caracas: Planeta/Fundación CELARG, 1995) and Gerald Aching, *Politics of Spanish American Modernismo: By Exquisite Design* (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

⁸ See Aníbal González, "Modernismo's Legacy," *A Companion to Spanish American Modernismo* (Woodbridge y Rochester: Tamesis, 2007); Iván Schulman, *El proyecto inconcluso: Vigencia del modernismo* (México: Siglo Veintiuno editores, 2002); Cathy Jrade, "Modernismo's Lasting Impact," *Modernismo, Modernity and the Development of Spanish American Literature* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998). For an analysis of this topic and its links with Rubén Darío and Vargas Vila in *El desbarrancadero* see my article "Telología literaria en *El desbarrancadero* de Fernando Vallejo". *Literatura: teoría, historia, crítica* 14. Número monográfico: Literatura colombiana entre milenios: balance crítico de dos décadas 1990-2010. June 2012 (Pagination TBD).

incorporating this realm into literature. It is also an issue that also puts Vallejo against the grain. Popular culture has an undeniable presence in his novels; especially in *El fuego secreto*, in which Fernando remembers the time he spent in gay clubs and bars in Medellín in the 1960's when boleros and tangos by Leo Marini, Daniel Santos and Carlos Gardel were ubiquitous. Disseminated throughout Vallejo's novels are melodramatic evocations of lyrics from bolero, a musical genre considered to be an expression of the entrance of the masses into modernity in Latin America starting in the 40's and 50's. In *El fuego secreto* the old man even declares that his life is written in its lyrics: "[y]o tengo la vida mía apuntalada en canciones: me quitan una y se inclina hacia un lado, me quitan otra y se inclina hacia el otro, me quitan otra y se desploma en el aire" (205). In passages like this one the narrator distances himself from what is otherwise a forceful rejection of popular culture. Even in the passage previously quoted, while allowing his elitism to lapse for a moment, Fernando remains self-consciously archaic, indulging in the popular culture of a vanished era. Yet he is more often almost entirely disdainful of modern mass media and trumpets his hatred for soccer, television, samba, jazz and rock and roll. Fernando laments that Colombia used to be a country plagued by poets and is now a nation obsessed with soccer, which according to him is the most antipoetic thing that could ever exist. "La vida me ha castigado con un siglo de jazz y estrépito rock, que me revientan el hígado y la cabeza" he says in *Los días azules* (109).

II.

Declarations by Fernando, such as his claim that a century of jazz and rock music has made his head explode, call attention to how the nature of his experience of modernity shapes his behavior and self-expression. The experience of modernity is not detachable from the *modernistas*, being as they were the first generation of writers to have reacted to the changes modernity brought to the recently independent Latin American nations in the 19th century. These changes were linked to some of the ideals of the project of modernity, such as secularization, positivism, industrialization, urbanization, democratization and capitalism. *Modernista* writers

conveyed an ambivalent reaction to the experience of modernity in growing urban centers such as Mexico City, Buenos Aires, Havana, Santiago and Bogotá. While figures like Silva, Casal, Darío, Martí and Gutierrez Nájera expressed discomfort with the uncertain place of the poet in societies increasingly guided by utilitarian and scientific values, they were also fascinated by the transformative power of money or electricity and expressed this fascination by actively publishing in newspapers and journals chronicles devoted to capturing the spirit of modernity.⁹

A century later, when the failures of cosmopolitan modernity in Colombia are evident in its narco-infused society flooded by poverty and violence and trapped in an ongoing civil war, the experience of modernity is equally central to Vallejo's narrator. This becomes clear in his depiction of a character living at the dawn of the 20th century. Tonino Dávila appears several times in Vallejo's novels. According to the narrator this peculiar character died of a most unusual rage. Dávila is the first victim of the "shock del futuro" when the first car arrives in Medellín by mule:

Por allá a principios del siglo veinte, en los confines del tiempo, trajeron a Medellín, a lomo de mula, el primer carro, y lo pusieron a circular por el parque de Berrío, a darle vueltas y vueltas. Tonino que vivía "en el marco de la plaza", empezó a desvariarse, y mientras el carro echaba humo y alegremente resoplaba afuera, el pobre viejo se iba enloqueciendo, se iba desintegrando de rabia. Con cera se taponaba los oídos para no oír el traqueteo infernal pero en vano, el motor le taladraba los huesos de los sesos. No resistió lo que se le venía encima, el alud del futuro que me ha tocado a mí... (662)

⁹ The ways in which Latin American countries—as former colonies of Spain and Portugal—would have experienced modernity is the subject of much controversy, an ubiquitous debate that exceeds the scope of this text. It is important to clarify that by modernity I am referring to the project of modernization that started with the changes brought by the Industrial Revolution and the consolidation of the nation states in the 19th century. The recently published study on the topic by Alejandro Mejías-López provides valuable insights to these debates and their relevance and implications for the study of the *modernistas*. According to Mejías-López if the experience of modernity in the 19th century is related to the variety of processes that constitute what we call modernization, then there should be no doubt that "there was nothing vicarious or ghostly in the Spanish American experience so forcefully and insightfully described by modernista writing from Martí to Rodó. That these processes in Latin America differed from those in Europe and the United States (which also differed from each other) may be true, but in the 19th century (at the very least) 'different' becomes an almost empty signifier; modernization was ultimately different *everywhere from everywhere else* and without fixed directionality." (33)

The avalanche the narrator claims he has had to endure is essentially the onslaught of modern life at the turn of the 21st century. Vallejo's stance towards this avalanche attests to the parallels that can be drawn between the *modernistas'* cultural production and that of the members of the Generation of '72. Both generations write in the midst of periods of significant transition. A century after the *modernistas*, Vallejo's generation is forced to confront the failures of democracy in the continent as well as to come to terms with the rapid changes brought by the rise of neoliberal politics in the region. In Vallejo's narrative, with his homecoming in novels like *La Virgen de los sicarios* and *El desbarrancadero*, Fernando faces the ultimate failure of the project of modernity begun at the end of the 19th century. This is obvious in his constant evocation of figures like José Asunción Silva, Rufino José Cuervo, and Porfirio Barba Jacob and his declaration that he is "descendiente rabioso de los liberales radicales colombianos como Vargas Vila y Diógenes Arrieta" in *El desbarrancadero* (176). In line with this claim, the old man focuses many of his diatribes on the *Regeneración*, that 19th century project which sought to "redeem" Colombia from the rule of liberal ideas by resolutely declaring that the nation should be built on the pillars of Catholicism and Hispanism, and building these into the new constitution of 1886.

But it is mostly through his accounts of aimless wanderings through decaying landscapes where he encounters beggars, stray dogs, rats, trash, muggers, rapists and stabbers that the narrator confronts the every-day signs of the failure of the modern project in Colombia. According to him, living in Medellín can be compared to bouncing through life like a dead person: "así vamos por sus calles los muertos vivos hablando de robos, de atracos, de otros muertos...sumidos en el desastre" (*La Virgen* 76).

These interactions often lead to the narrator's iconic diatribes tinted by despair and an obsessive nostalgia. He longs for pristine churches now frequented by criminals; crystal-clear rivers now turned into sewers that carry corpses downstream and for Santa Anita, his grandparents' hacienda now vanished into a neighborhood built for the poor. This gaze backwards to a space and time forever lost causes the narrator to see the present as

decay rather than progress, rot rather than ripening, and allows him to declare Colombia a total failure.

But the crude realities described by the narrator do not cause only despair. Fernando often finds fascination and joy in his dealings with the underbelly of the city and in his confrontations with an almost catastrophic modernity. One of the more striking examples of this joy is the homoerotic desire that he experiences for the teenage assassins in the slums of Medellín in *La Virgen de los sicarios* (1994). Ever since *El fuego secreto* Fernando had recognized that he felt a “fascinación fascinada por el hampa” (269). In *Años de Indulgencia* (1989), he refers to his search for images in marginal neighborhoods during his years as a filmmaker as a quest that puts him in a delusional state:

...voy por estos barrios sin agua, sin ley, sin luz, sin alcantarillas, filmando con excitación rabiosa lo que encuentro: niños barrigones, viejos borrachines, perros sarnosos, charcos con moscas, putas preñadas, gallinas, basura, cerdos. Y para acabar de ajustar, para rematar, en la estación del ferrocarril campesinos llegando a la ciudad ... Entonces a mí se me enciende el foco, la imaginación: ya sé lo que debo hacer, lo que debo filmar: un tugurio en llamas. Un tugurio incendiándose en la noche. ¡Qué delirio! ¡Qué poema! (512)

His encounter with landscapes as grim as the one described above excites the narrator’s imagination and powers Vallejo’s writing. In Vallejo’s novels images of poverty and decay are unquestionably invested with an aesthetic value. Like Baudelaire’s painter of modern life, Vallejo’s narrator is capable of finding beauty in the utmost decay. The *comunas*, he says explicitly, “a fuerza de tan feas son hasta hermosas.” (85) He describes them as: “casas y casas y casas de dos pisos a medio terminar, con el segundo piso siempre en veremos, amontonadas, apeñuscadas, de las que salen niños y niños como brota agua de la roca por la varita de Moisés. De súbito, sobre las risas infantiles cantan las ráfagas de una metralleta. Ta-ta-ta-ta-tá...” (85)

Decay is what the narrator claims to find when he returns to Medellín or Bogotá. As he states in *Entre fantasmas*: “Por última y definitiva vez he vuelto al barrio de mi niñez a constatar la inexorable decadencia que nos espera a todos: hombres, perros, gatos, naciones” (707). The narrator’s fascination with this inexorable decay underscores

how his use of words like disaster and decay should not be taken lightly. In *El desbarrancadero* (2001), the narrator asserts that we live under laws of thermodynamics that stipulate that: “todo lo que está bien se daña y lo que está mal se empeora” (105). This notion of the imminence of decay in Vallejo’s narrative is also evident in the narrator’s age (Fernando is merely forty). He is somber and aged because, as he puts it in *Entre fantasmas*: “poquito a poco, pasito a paso había dejado de vivir en el presente para vivir en el pasado, y mientras más pasado ese pasado y más lejano, más espléndido” (564).

One of those strong links that Fernando has with the past is his return to decadence. Passages like the ones above point to the obvious relationship between Vallejo’s writing and this discourse that was the subject of much controversy for the *modernistas* in Spanish America at the turn of the 20th century.¹⁰ Vallejo’s reformulation of a decadent aesthetic in response to modernity at the end of the 20th century is one of the most reasons for his referencing of the *modernistas*.¹¹ Decadent topics and images abound in Vallejo’s novels. The narrator’s fascination with young men and his association with violence and eroticism, most evident in *La Virgen de los sicarios*, are among the attitudes through which he evokes the tradition of decadence. Among the “perversions” that link him to what critics have called an “erotismo fin de siglo” are some as cliché as the imagery of decadence as necrophilia—confessed in *Años de indulgencia*

¹⁰ As Sylvia Molloy has argued, decadence was seen as nothing more than a European trend that had little to do with a young and promising continent that stood in stark contrast to a decaying Old World. One of the fiercest critics of the use of decadence in Spanish America at the time was a *modernista* himself, José Enrique Rodó. Rodó referred to decadence as a tendency that lead to triviality and frivolity, a “prurito enteramente pueril de retorcer la frase y de jugar con las palabras” (Rodó 84). According to Rodó this style went against the necessities of the time.

¹¹ Matei Calinescu called decadence one of the “five faces of modernity,” one of the discourses that flourished in Europe in the late 19th century as a critique of modernity’s “myth of progress.” Those artists known as decadents (such as Baudelaire, Verlaine, Wilde and D’Annunzio) experienced modernity as catastrophe. This sense of impending catastrophe sprang from uncertainty about the place of art and literature in a world dominated by the dynamics of the global market economy. The decadent artist’s response to this impending catastrophe was to distance himself from the increasingly uniform masses by isolating himself from the rest of society, and finding ways to shock the bourgeois—and to seek pleasure in that distance and shock. The decadent artists found solace in the artificial, the arcane and the exotic and cultivated an ornate and eccentric style with which they sought to make poetry and art a hermetic realm for an initiated few.

(562)—and as disconcerting as the narrator’s daydream of engaging in sexual contact with a younger version of himself in *El fuego secreto* (241). Other decadent traits present in Vallejo’s writing worth mentioning are his narrator’s misogyny, which, as David Weir has explained, is associated with the decadents’ despising reproduction and their cult of the artificial, and their attacks on democracy—seen as a threat to artistic sensibility and despised by figures like Baudelaire and Barbey D’Aurevilly.

Essential to understanding Vallejo’s decadent aesthetic is the irony behind some of Fernando’s nostalgic declarations. Take his complaint about the loss of the traditions of “las musas, la misa y el chocolate” or his suggestion that the only way to counterbalance the rule of death in Colombia is through Catholicism and what he terms the reproductive mania of its adherents. These ideas do not fit straightforwardly into the discourse of a narrator who is a furious enemy of the Catholic church and a detractor of human reproduction. Resorting to such assertions underscores the irony that cuts across Vallejo’s discourse. Vallejo’s acid critiques of the political and religious orders, his inappropriate comments charged with misogyny and disdain for the masses, and, at times, even tainted by racism are, on one level, marked by irony—another decadent trait present in his writing. Irony is essential to the character of the decadent dandy that he uses to fashion his narrator and to articulate, as I will show, a peculiar critique of Colombia’s failed project of modernity.

III.

One of decadence’s traits was a nearly obsessive focus on individualism, a trait expressed in the dandy’s cult of personality. The dandy is shaped by his pose. Constantly displaying himself and wishing to be seen by others, he nevertheless remains a character marked by an air of uncertainty, hidden under successive masks (Coblence 178). In his essay entitled “The Painter of Modern Life” (1863), Baudelaire presents the dandy as one of the masks worn by the artist that “seeks modernity” and acts as the interpreter of its beauty, even when this beauty is linked to perverse realities. Baudelaire refers to the dandy’s joy in his ability to shock others and his satisfaction with the fact that he is never shocked.

Vallejo's narrator resembles the dandy because he is a figure that is constantly confronting modernity as catastrophe. The old man created by Vallejo is mostly nostalgic about the past, echoing Baudelaire's comparison of the dandy to a declining star full of melancholy. Fernando yearns for a past forever lost: Medellín before there were so many factories, cars, thieves and a subway; Santa Anita, his grandparent's vanished hacienda; and even José Asunción Silva's Bogotá, plagued by poets and obsessed grammarians. Fernando constantly declares himself nostalgic for Silva's cultured and sophisticated Bogotá, for the times when charming and classy young women still knew how to play the piano. The *modernista* poet is, in fact, a point of reference for the unease with which he experiences modernity. Silva stands for what is forever lost in the past, a Colombia where the highest ideal was poetry and not soccer (Chapolas 554). According to Fernando, the decline began with a crucial episode that divides Colombia's history in two: the assassination of the liberal caudillo and then presidential candidate Jorge Eliécer Gaitán in 1948. During the riots that followed the crime—he explains to his readers in *Chapolas negras* (1995) (Vallejo's biography of Silva)—the notes of the poet's autopsy disappeared along with a very special edition of one of his books of poetry. The narrator blames the multitude for its profanation of Silva's body and for its attack on the order that he represented.

Fernando is resentful, even angry at the crowds, and, consequently, goes on to assert that the rise of this multitude marked the beginning of Colombia's inevitable decadence and collapse. He is particularly abhorred by the country's obsession with soccer and asserts that the spectacle of the crowds cheering and screaming in front of the television as they watch twenty-two "idiots" following a ball around, reveals that Colombia is no longer the country of Silva's poetry but a coconut that is emptier than a soccer ball (554).

The narrator's despair is therefore directed towards what could be considered the entrance of the masses into the cultural realm in Latin America, a process that according to critics like José Joaquín Brunner and Jesús Martín Barbero started precisely in the forties with the rise of mass media in the region. The grumpy narrator often declares himself an enemy

of popular media and culture. As I have quoted above, he declares that life has punished him with a century of jazz and rock and roll.

The narrator's unease can be compared to what Barbero has called the intellectual's despair in times of "cultural disorder." According to Barbero, a world where the masses have not been entering modernity through books and the lettered culture, but rather through the opportunities and cultural models offered by the mass media, has made intellectuals weary. Barbero criticizes this weariness and considers that intellectuals should redefine their role and embrace the challenges and possibilities opened by this very same "disorder" (123). While many of the writers from his generation were among the first to embrace the challenges presented by popular media and culture, at first glance Vallejo's dandy seems to be not at all interested in these challenges and possibilities. He is constantly complaining about what he perceives as the decay in the present and is constantly longing for Silva's Colombia.

Silva is also the creator of a character who is, in many ways, an antecedent to Vallejo's own narrator: José Fernández, the caricaturized decadent hero of *De Sobremesa*, a novel written by Silva around 1886. Vallejo's work abounds with passages containing self-portraits in which the narrator depicts himself as a sort of descendant of Fernández, a decadent hero isolated from the outside world and surrounded by cosmopolitan objects and luxuries characteristic of the interiors described by Latin American and European novels from the turn of the 20th century.

This image of Fernando secluded from the world in Santa Anita—like Des Esseintes in Huysman's *Against the grain*—is nevertheless ironic. The anachronistic portrait of the aristocrat "hacendado" surrounded by luxuries is one in a series of portraits of the narrator as a caricaturized dandy. Those anachronistic portraits often appear intertwined with the narrator's equally anachronistic heterodoxies, with the contents that guarantee that, like a dandy, he will shock his readers in the context of the end of the 20th century. Such is the case in the following fragment of *El fuego secreto*, in which a declaration of a hatred of poverty is accompanied by an image of the narrator as a refined dandy:

Odio la pobreza. Por ruin y roñosa, indolente y perezosa, altanera y servil. Y por ignorante además. El pobre no lee, no estudia, no

progresar, no se quiere superar. Viven en bidonvilles, tugurios, vecindales, favelas, y el trabajo les causa horror. Todo lo esperan del patrón o el gobierno, o de usted o de mí... Por eso no quiero al pobre. ¿Que pinte una pared? Empuerca la alfombra. ¿Que limpie la alfombra? Empuerca la pared. Deja sobre mi tapiz fino y caro, el gobelino, sus dedos pegajosos, pringosos, huellas digitales de criminal. ¿Por qué serán así? Su paladar no detecta el caviar, el salmón las trufas; sólo sabores burdos: arroz y frijoles. En cuanto al tacto no distinguen ni el algodón: el lino y la seda se les hacen fibras sintéticas. (*El fuego secreto* 251)

Fernando's exaggerated attacks on and insults of the poor lead to complaints about their lack of taste for refinements as cliché as caviar, salmon, truffles, linen and silk. Vallejo's return to decadence and the figure of the dandy appears to be at least partly parody and caricature. This is confirmed in another series of self-portraits in which he is far from appearing as that refined aristocrat secluded in an "ivory tower." In *Años de indulgencia* Fernando declares that he is closer to his "true self" when in contact with the underbelly of the city, sleeping under its bridges, covered by its filth. In passages that he calls his "baños de tinieblas," he describes his own body as a reflection of the soul of a miserable homeless woman, as a reflection of the decaying urban landscape. In communion with the underbelly of the city Fernando confronts the many faces of the failure of the project of modernity in Colombia, and invites the reader to question his rejection of popular culture, his despair for Silva's Colombia, the sincerity of all those heterodoxies formulated from an ivory tower.

IV.

Just as this instability in the self-fashioning of the narrator throughout Vallejo's narrative seems like an invitation to question his sincerity, the passages in which he displays a politically incorrect misogynistic or a racist discourse guaranteed to shock his readers, make it almost too easy to label him as an anti-modern dandy. But the polemical, aggressive and seemingly anti-modern rhetoric with which Vallejo seems to be constantly seeking to shock us is not necessarily shocking or anti-modern purely for its own sake. Seen from the angle of the pose of the decadent dandy that Vallejo recycles to create his narrator, this rhetoric

appears to be a peculiar critique not of all modernity or progress, but of what could be regarded as Colombia's failed attempts at modernity.

The politics of posing is an aspect of dandysim that has been addressed by critics like François Coblence and Molloy. According to Coblence, the dandy invites others to question their identity by making his pose a reflection and a projection of a given society. According to Molloy, posing has a destabilizing energy. The poser is constantly seeking visibility and controlling his exaggerations as a strategy of provocation, a challenge forcing a gaze, a reading, a framing (Molloy 142).

Within this framework, the image that Vallejo's dandy reflects and projects and towards which he forces the reader's gaze is of a project of modernity that has proven a failure in the context of the turn of the 21st century. Vallejo confronts this failure by exposing the crude realities of poverty and extreme violence in the slums of Medellín, realities that he frequently traces back to that period of rising political violence of the 1950's known as La Violencia.

What makes his own pose all the more relevant and powerful is that his anti-modern dandy reflects negatively the simulation and posing involved in Colombia's own project of modernity. Concepts like posing, simulation, artifice and masking, cloaking or costuming are frequently found in studies of the peculiarities of the projects of modernity in Latin America. According to Beatriz González-Stephan, modernity in Latin America is marked by an abyss between essence and appearance, a superimposition of structures of the past and the present that were "covered" but never reconciled. Consuelo Corredor approaches Colombian modernity as a project in which an emphasis on the material and economic modernization of the country concealed the lack of a "real" development of modern values like the democratization of education and culture (38). William Ospina also elaborates this idea of modernity as an appearance by referring to Colombian society as one characterized by what he calls "rituals of simulation." According to Ospina, the belief that Colombia inherited the ideals of the French Revolution is a sham. For Ospina, disguised under the values of a liberal republic, Colombia isn't far from being an anti-modern

society, still determined by colonial structures and relations and built on the principles of exclusion.

By creating a dandy with an anti-modern pose—a heterodox narrator seemingly opposed to modern egalitarian and democratic values—Vallejo highlights the fraudulent pose in Colombia's own project of modernity. A good example is the truncation of liberal values is the 1886 constitution, which bound national identity to the Catholic and Spanish tradition. The fact that this constitution remained in effect until 1991, and consequently that freedom of religion and the rights of minorities were not recognized until that time and remain an ongoing struggle, demonstrates the stark truncation of Colombia's project of modernity. Perpetual violence and lasting poverty and squalor too mark its limits, and the lack of substance at its core.

To see simulation and posing as concepts that describe the very base of the project of modernity in Colombia suggests that Vallejo's return to decadence and to the figure of the dandy has dimensions that go beyond the merely aesthetic. This return, as I have suggested, has a political dimension through which Vallejo proves to be a meaningful voice in the Generation of '72's questioning of Latin American modernity at the turn of the 21st century. Vallejo's use of the dandy carries an irritating insistence about the way things really are in Colombia; according to the narrator in *Chapolas negras*: “el pecado del escándalo no está en el que escandaliza sino en el que se deja escandalizar. Éste es el que se debe atar la piedra de molino al cuello y echarse al agua” (272).

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