

An altar for the marginal. Cross reading between *Burned Money* and *The Virgin of the Sicarios*

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Abstract

With a purpose that can well be considered, in principle, comparative, this text makes an interpretive exercise on the novels *Burned Money* (Ricardo Piglia) and *The Virgin of the Sicarios* (Fernando Vallejo), with the desire to show how, in the thematic and stylistic concordance, there is a clear interest in revealing, without prejudice, the marginalized life of a certain sector of society branded by criminality. In an effort that bases the historical context in which both novels appear (and from which they drink) literary aesthetics reveals the strength to impact social springs.

Keywords: Literature; City; Marginality; Vallejo; Piglia.

The virgin of the sicarios, by Fernando Vallejo, and *Burned Money*, by Ricardo Piglia, are two different novels, written in different contexts and that, however, keep common elements that allow them to be read in parallel, beyond the narrative anecdote of the plot that each work addresses. The two have as protagonists antiheroes, criminals who live in social and geographical marginality, and who thanks to literature, become not only beings who occupy the center of a story but also sublime: words sacralize them figuratively and literal.

Fernando Vallejo published *The virgin of the sicarios* in 1994, a few months after the murder of drug trafficker Pablo Escobar and when in Colombia, and specifically in Medellín, the territory of the novel, there was a bloody war over drug trafficking. On the other hand, *Burned Money* won the Planeta Prize in 1997, but the story that Piglia tells, with his own language and narrative structure from the end of the 20th century, occurs in 1965 in the

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province of Buenos Aires. The echoes of the dictatorship appear underground in the story, as voices from beyond the grave.

Alexis, the protagonist of *The virgin of the sicarios*, is a murderer for hire, homosexual, who for seven months, until his death, maintains a relationship with the narrator of the novel. El Gaucho Dorda and El Nene Brignone, the protagonists of *Burnt Money*, are assassins who are part of the band of Enrique Mario Malito. "When meat was scarce, they lay together, *El Nene* and *Gaucho Rubio*" (1997, p. 54). In both works the protagonists are homosexual offenders who are not bosses: they are subordinates or, as would be said in the language of the *Paisas* neighborhoods that the recent novel by Luis Miguel Rivas takes up, the dead man was bigger, they are *chichipatos*.

The large contemporary city is what is known as a "metropolitan area" a sum of several municipalities, with center and peripheries. In these two novels the authors narrate from the margins of these cities. "There was a quiet and peaceful town on the outskirts of Medellín called Sabaneta" (p. 7). This is how *The virgin of the sicarios* begins, a novel in which the Cathedral of Medellín, Junín and downtown neighborhoods appear, but also the communes: the narrator explains that Medellín is two cities, the one above and the one below, which they monitor each other. "Point me out, child, your neighborhood, what is it? Is it Santo Domingo Savio? Or El Popular, or La Salle, Or Villa del Socorro, or La Francia? Anyone, unreachable, between those lights there in the distance." Something similar happens with the Buenos Aires of Piglia, where there is no "up and down" but there is a North zone and a South zone. *Burnt Money* occurs in Greater Buenos Aires, which includes its suburbs. The theft that triggers the story occurs in the park of San Fernando: "San Fernando is a residential suburb of Buenos Aires, with quiet and tree-lined streets" (p. 14) and Dorda, the narrator reports, "He always walked through Morón, for Haedo He came from the field and was always pulling to the outskirts of the city" (p. 52).

That cartographic marginality in which the characters move also coincides with their activity: criminals, by definition, are outside the law. However, the political commitment of Vallejo and Piglia is to doubt that there is a shore or margin that divides the good from the bad or the heroes of the villains. In these works the game of police and thieves has interchangeable roles: "Here there is no authority except to steal, to plunder the public cattle" (p. 51), says the narrator of *The Virgin of the Hitmen*, while in *Silver Burnt Dorda* reflects: "Who can think of being a cane, a sick person, a guy who does not know what to do with his life, a -pusilian-" (p. 110). Those policemen or gray hairs are the ones that "it is said, they would have fixed in San Fernando the flight of the criminals in exchange for a part of the loot" (p. 133).

Language is another way writers find to highlight marginality, and in that Piglia's bet is more radical than Vallejo's. In *The virgin of the sicarios*, the narrator is a grammarian who needs to translate words such as *changón*, dolls, iron or down, among many others. An example: "So what, *parce*, winds or suitcases? what did he say? He said: Hello son of a bitch. It is a greeting from ruffians" (p. 23) or "we kill him for *chichipato*, for *bazofia*, for garbage, for existing" (p. 28) are examples of the way in which Vallejo introduces Alexis's

jargon into the text. Piglia's work is different: *Burnt money* has no glossary or translation. In its pages appear without complex words such as *serve*, *mejicanear*, *franelear*, *guacha*, *gayola*, *yegüita*, *junaba*, *chamuyo* and other street expressions, heiress of the lunfardo who entered the Argentine literature, with pride, from *Martín Fierro* de José Hernández, in 1872, and *El Matadero* by Esteban Echeverría, in 1871:

-There the sebum gets into the tits, the aunt-shouted one.

"He hid it in the *alzapon*," replied the black woman.

-Che! black witch, I got out of here before I hit you a cut - the butcher exclaimed.

-What do I do, Juan? Don't be bad! I only want the belly and the guts.

-They are for that witch: go to h [...] (Echeverría, 1871).

That popular casual language that comes from the bully's mouth is consolidated with Roberto Arlt's *Rabid Toy* (1926). In the introduction that Piglia wrote in 1973 to Arlt's work, an interesting reflection appears on Arlt's translation work from Lunfardo to Spanish. According to Piglia that the "unforgettable" effect on Arlt's prose comes from those translations that erase the illusion of naturalness.

In another tone, Mempo Giardinelli uses a language close to jargon in *Luna Caliente* (1983) to demonstrate the transformation of the educated and rational lawyer Ramiro Bernárdez, when he opens his new condition of murderer: "*perdido por perdido, falta envido, se dijo, ahora hay que darle para adelante porque estoy jugado. Jugado-fugado. Fugado-fogado. Fogado-tocado. Tocado-toquido-Toquido-ronquido. Ronquido de muerto. Ronquido-jodido. Bien jodido*" (p. 31).

With that literary tradition as solid as support, it is understood that Piglia does not need to translate *lunfardo* or *parlache* to the Spanish of Rufino José Cuervo and plays his cards be in naturalness. It is not necessary to clean dirty language because clean and dirty are, like good and bad or police and thieves, concepts that can be exchanged. There is beauty in that popular aesthetic and, in that sense *Burnt money* achieves, from the language, an even more powerful demarginalization than that of *The Virgin of the Sicarios*, by allowing the voice of the marginals to be read diaphanous, without validators to translate it, legitimize or clean.

In what both novels do coincide is in showing, without moralisms or subtleties the subject of homosexuality, which is approached so naturally, that it is not even the center of the narration: the protagonists are gay but talking about that was comparable of saying that today it rains in the city. It is not about homoerotic novels, although Vallejo addresses the issue with more interest and detail than Piglia. There is, in fact, more naivety than passion in the way of talking about these relationships: "The first time a man picked me up I thought I was going to get pregnant," Dorda said" (p. 53). For his part, about Alexis, the narrator says:

[...] asked him if he liked women. 'No', he replied, with a 'no' so resounding, so unexpected, that it left me perplexed [...] neither had he slept with anyone nor was he going to bed [...] That this was what was behind those green eyes, an uncontaminated purity of women (p. 19).

These novels are published when AIDS is barely a decade old and is still considered a homosexual disease. That both works address relationships between men with such freshness also reflects a political position that seeks from the language to demarginalize a sector of society that has been pariah. In neither of the two texts are there reflections on homosexual love as opposed to heterosexual, nor questions about the differences between one and the other. The ethics of both writers is to build from the language a normalized universe for homosexuals, in which their existence is not questioned.

Just as the authors abstain from moral judgments about homosexuality, they also do not question the criminality of their protagonists. In both works the thugs kill just because. It is not about starving crimes. They do not commit crimes: they work. Therefore, the authors seem to say, one would have to question why society marginalizes or excludes these people who have an absolute mental inability to self-regulate and are consequently innocent, as explained clearly in *The virgin of the sicarios*:

The father he came to know that the boy was of a sicario profession and that he had killed thirteen, but what had happened to those he did not come to confess? That was the sin, not his since he was simply doing a job, <Un camello> (p. 32).

In his own way, Piglia raises something similar in *Burned money* when referring to Malito (which from his name is clearly not Bad but Malito): "The cruel delectation with which he read the police news was proof of his inability to elucidate the moral root of the facts of his life" (p. 40). In this distance from crime, Vallejo and Piglia agree with Mempo Giardinelli, who writes in *Luna Caliente*: "I had never imagined that a man, involuntarily turned into a murderer, could suddenly overcome so many prejudices and become cold, unscrupulous" (p. 31).

Regarding the reading of the press, both Piglia and Vallejo show that a contemporary way to achieve inclusion is to appear in the media. The marginal character feels vindicated when he is talked about on the radio, on television or when his photo is in the newspaper. In both books there are scenes in which the city's media are mentioned with their own name and he realizes about the record they make of crime: "El Colombiano is the newspaper of Medellín, the one that gives the dead: so many today, how many tomorrow?" (p. 31) says the narrator of *The virgin of the sicarios*, while in *Burnt money* it is reported that *Malito*, the band's boss, read the press and "was satisfied not to be recognized, but to the sad time for not seeing his picture, and secretly admired by the spread of misfortune that is eagerly eaten by thousands and thousands of readers" (p. 40).

The protagonists of both works are part of a distant generation of cultured or elite culture, and formed, instead, in the midst of mass culture, cheaper, accessible and en-

tertaining. While Dorda reads the magazine *Mecánica Popular* and El Nene sings songs in English of the *Head and Body* band (although, actually, the lyrics of the song that includes Piglia are by Tom Waits), Vallejo writes that the *sicario* has never read a book and that: “Driven by his essential emptiness, Alexis watches all kinds of TV. shows: soap operas, football matches, rock ensembles, a whore declaring, the president” (p. 33).

However, the work of demarginalization that Piglia and Vallejo do, go beyond taking as protagonists antiheroes and giving them space in the literature with their language, their criminal activity, their peripheral neighborhoods and their homosexuality. The narrative of both not only brings from the periphery to the center characters who live to the limit but go one step further: it sacralizes them, sublimates them, builds them an altar using symbols of Catholic religiosity, the context is one of the most sacred of societies.

Alexis is an angel and so the narrator refers to him in many of the pages of the book. “Our lighted nights of passion, I hugged my guardian angel and he embraced me with the love he had for me” (p. 24). This is a *sicario* who uses three scapulars to protect himself, who is entrusted to Mary Help of Christians and who goes to her sanctuary on a pilgrimage, asking for protection. Vallejo presents the *sicario* as a devout Christian.

Piglia on the other hand builds at the end of his novel a beautiful image in which Dorda reaches the Nene, wounded to death, “the medal of the Virgin of Luján” (p. 148) and then reports that “he kept it in his arms as who sustains a Christ”, in a clear allusion to Michelangelo’s *Pieta*. If Alexis is an angel with the face of a Child God, Dorda is the Virgin Mary. Later it is read that “the voice, to Gaucho, came out firm and the whole city was quiet, silent, and his voice sounded like the voice of God that comes from above, the voice of the Blessed One”(p. 154) and then Dorda prays the Hail Mary.

It is, in conclusion, two novels in which crime, the dead, leaks and action are anecdotes that help authors to question an important issue in contemporary society: the exclusion of hundreds of young people they dedicate themselves to crime as a way of life, without moral dilemmas, and that from their neighborhoods, their language and aesthetics build marginal universes. Vallejo and Piglia do not describe these worlds with a language of tourist attraction, zoo visit or object of sociological study. On the contrary, both authors narrate from the point of view of criminals, with total naturalness. While the police or journalism talk about “dropping off” criminals, these authors take their dead protagonists and raise them to a sacred altar. If atheists don’t pray to them, they can at least admire them.

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