

# Writing the (Communal) Self in Spanish Contemporary Fiction

Family, Class, and Generation in Manuel Vilas and Carlos Pardo

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Referring in particular to the writer Marta Sanz (\*1967), Patricia López-Gay has drawn attention to a recent tendency in Spanish autofiction that she describes as “the return of the political” (López-Gay 2020: 189).<sup>1</sup> Sanz herself had perceived “an opening of the self towards a ‘we’,” “a pretension towards the communal,” in autofictional works such as Carlos Pardo’s *Vida de Pablo* [Life of Pablo] (2011) and Aurora Venturini’s *Nosotros, los Caserta* (2011; *We, the Caserta Family* 2022) (Sanz 2014: 93). According to López-Gay, the texts in question turn away from “abstractions about the human condition” in order to “privilege the treatment of the problems of a given socio-historical present” (López-Gay 2020: 195). This, of course, could also be seen as an extension of recent autofictions’ general tendency to strengthen literary fiction’s relation to referentiality and reality, and thus to participate in contemporary literature’s turn towards the real or the ‘true’, implemented, for instance, by combining fiction with elements of reportage or memoir (Donnarumma 2014; Mora 2019; Marchese 2021).

Both politically and aesthetically, these socially inflected autofictions may be understood as narratives of the self that open themselves towards the dimension of the communal and collective. This may take the form of a generational perspective, yet it may also involve techniques through which literary works interpellate their own public or readership. This latter variety has been conceptualised by Priscilla Gac-Artigas under the umbrella term *colectficción*,

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1 In the following, I will provide the Spanish original for primary sources only. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

which, under recourse to examples from Latin America, she defines as “a new pact of reading in which the reader, by way of discursive, ludic, or experimental strategies, is invited to participate actively in the reconfiguration of the history represented” (Gac-Artigas 2022: 11, n.1) – an approach, she argues, that critically responds to “the triumph of individualism and the marginalisation exacerbated by economic crisis” (Gac-Artigas 2022: 22).

In a similar vein, Eva Blome has deployed the concept of autosociobiography to engage with a broad corpus of French and German literary works that exhibit a certain sociological ambition and that are specifically concerned with the category of class consciousness and social mobility. In contrast to ‘conventional’, subject-centred varieties of autofiction, these texts prominently make use of collectivising, generational, or genealogical frameworks to speak about the self (Blome 2020: 546). In her article, Blome cites several examples of literary representations of upward social mobility (often represented via the trope of revisiting the familial-social origins), from Annie Ernaux (*La Place* 1984) and Didier Eribon (*Retour à Reims* 2009) to Saša Stanišić (*Herkunft* 2019) (Blome 2020: 542). Furthermore, Blome highlights the central importance of *Bildung* in these narratives, characterising the genre in the following way: “Autobiographies are therefore not only to be understood as narratives of individuality or individual life paths. From a genre-theoretical perspective, their proximity to the family novel and the generational novel should also be considered.” (Blome 2020: 548)

In the following, I will analyse two representative examples of contemporary socially oriented fiction in Spanish,<sup>2</sup> situated at the crossroads between autobiographical memoir and autofictional novel: first, the best-selling autobiographical novel *Ordesa* (2018; *Ordesa* 2020) by Manuel Vilas, and second, the autofictional novel *El viaje a pie de Johann Sebastian* [Johann Sebastian's Journey on Foot] (2014) by Carlos Pardo. If I distinguish here between ‘autobiographical’ and ‘autofictional’, I do so in the awareness that the boundary between the two in contemporary fiction is malleable and permeable.<sup>3</sup> In any case, both

2 For a succinct survey of recent Spanish autofictions, see Ródenas de Moya 2015. As we will see, the narrator of Vilas's novel presents himself as more straightforwardly autobiographical. Yet as autosociobiographical texts, both works discussed here share several elements with literary autofiction. Autosociobiography may thus generally be understood as a specific subset of the genre of autofiction.

3 Similarly, Blome stresses the proximity of the autobiographical to the novelistic (see above), and López-Gay likewise subsumes Vilas's *Ordesa* under the “autofictional turn.” I agree with her general observation which both stresses the ‘fictional’ and

novels reinterpret the genre of autobiography/autofiction in a 'relational' and quasi-sociological manner by painting a homodiegetic family portrait (arising on the occasion of dying parents, and hence from the perspective of remembering them) with a sustained focus on the question of social class. However, as we shall see, their authors approach the issues of class, family, and generation in different ways and with the aid of diverging literary strategies, which is perhaps itself an effect of their belonging to different generations. For this reason, I will discuss the two works not in the order of their respective publication dates, but instead move from Vilas to Pardo, from the older to the younger author, and thus from generational memories of the Franco years to those of the 1990s.

### **Manuel Vilas: *Ordesa* (2018)**

Manuel Vilas (\*1962) was born to working-class parents in a town in Aragon. His novel *Ordesa* (2018) is a memorial work that approaches the author's relationship to his parents from the temporal perspective of his father's earlier (2005) and his mother's recent death (2015). While several of Vilas's earlier writings, such as the novels *España* [Spain] (2008) or *Aire nuestro* [Our air] (2009), already played with certain elements of autofiction and were concerned with the (decentred) self's relation to communities such as family or nation (Benson/Cruz Suárez 2020: 204–5), *Ordesa* marks a departure by abandoning entirely the format of a fictional novel (Behiels 2021: 208). According to his own words, Vilas's intention with *Ordesa* was "to reflect on the beauty and poetry that existed in the lives of the generation of men and women born in the thirties, the age of my parents [...], to show the impudent poetry of the underprivileged in the history of Spain." (Qt. in Behiels 2021: 220)<sup>4</sup>

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the 'social' inflection in many examples of contemporary fiction: "In short, narratives emerge in which the autobiographical self, without denigrating its own fictionality or that of its environment, is also concerned with social issues that bring it back to the reader of its time." ["Surgen, en suma, narrativas donde el yo autobiográfico, sin denigrar su propia ficcionalidad o la de su entorno, se preocupa además por cuestiones sociales que lo devuelven al lector de su tiempo." (López-Gay 2020: 32–3)]

4 "reflejar la belleza y la poesía que hubo en las vidas de la generación de hombres y mujeres nacidos en los años treinta, la edad de mis padres [...], mostrar la impúdica poesía de los desfavorecidos de la historia de España." Vilas's more recent work

Vilas's book is notable for its overwhelmingly bleak account of the author's struggles with childhood sexual abuse, alcoholism, adultery, divorce, an unsatisfying existence as a high school teacher, and a troubled relationship with his two teenage sons. The narrative considers almost all aspects of life, past and present, in light of the memory of the autodiegetic narrator's dead parents. While in this regard the narrator appears to transcend the solipsistic focus on his personal life, the novel in fact remains securely anchored in his perspective. Vilas repeatedly insists on his class background (his father worked as a travelling textile salesman), yet his self-identification with family and community, sometimes tinged by vaguely Marxist rhetoric, pays scarce attention to how the author-narrator – who at this point has already become a fairly successful writer – came to acquire an education and a social role that differs markedly from that of his parents during the Franco years. Instead, in his attempt to dignify his parents' experience, he tends to glorify the material remnants of their life: "No aristocratic monuments, no VIP monuments, only ones born of the Spanish lower middle class of the 1960s, which are very beautiful, and are the mirror of my soul." (Vilas 2020: 139)<sup>5</sup>

Occasionally, however, the narrator does comment on the difference between his own experiences and those of his (grand)parents – for instance, a photo of his grandmother, in whose eyes he detects the traces of "centuries of Spanish peasantry" (Vilas 2020: 145-6)<sup>6</sup> – prompts him to remark that it was ultimately due to Franco that he was given the opportunity to read and write. This observation inserts his personal experience into a broader, generational perspective on historical change that encompasses Franco's ambivalent role with regard to Spain's conflicted relationship with modernity:

[M]y unnamed grandmother [...] is the daughter of a forgotten land, the lands of Somontano, and I can name those lands and those villages now because I went to university – which is to say, thanks to the dictator Francisco Franco Bahamonde, who laid the foundations for Cecilia's grandchildren to learn to read and write, who laid the foundations of the Spanish middle

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Alegria [Joy] (2019), dealing with the international success of *Ordesa* and the author's relationship to his sons, can also be classified as autofictional.

5 "Ningún prodigo aristocrático, ningún prodigo vip, solo los prodigios que emergen de la clase media-baja española de los años sesenta, que son muy hermosos, y son el espejo de mi alma." (Vilas 2018: 176)

6 "siglos de campesinado español" (Vilas 2018: 186).

class, who set Spain's political modernisation process back several decades and did so out of ignorance and stupidity. (Vilas 2020: 146)<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless, it is not fully apparent how his frustrating experiences and low income as a school teacher would justify the narrator's self-perception as a "proletarian" (Vilas 2018: 113). As for the issue of social mobility, he adopts a largely defeatist perspective:

We hadn't managed to escape the lower middle class; at best, we might have moved from the lower class to the middle class. Sometimes I think it would be preferable to be utterly destitute. Because if you're just lower class, you still have hope. (Vilas 2020: 73)<sup>8</sup>

The narrator's near-complete identification with his father is accompanied by a strong sense of stasis and immobility, resulting in the emphatic affirmation of a 'we' marked by a common victimhood: "Our world has always been barns, poverty, stink, alienation, disease, catastrophe." (Vilas 2020: 223)<sup>9</sup>

The tone is frequently one of political fatalism, denying the possibility of emancipation, of upward social mobility, and even of individuation and personal development, for example via the dynamic of the oedipal struggle. Accordingly, the narrator/son tends to underscore not so much the differences, but rather the analogies between the generations; in fact, the life of the son echoes and replicates his father's to the point of a complete, pathological identification:

He didn't sell much fabric and I don't sell many books – we're the same man. [...] We are living the same life – with different contexts, but it's the

7 "[M]i abuela innominada [...] es hija de una tierra olvidada, las tierras del Somontano, y ahora yo nombro esas tierras y esos pueblos gracias a que fui a la universidad, es decir, gracias al dictador Francisco Franco Bahamonde, que sentó las bases para que los nietos de Cecilia supiéramos leer y escribir, que sentó las bases de la clase media española, que retrasó la modernidad política de España unas cuantas décadas y lo hizo por ignorancia y por simpleza." (Vilas 2018: 186)

8 "No habíamos logrado salir de la clase media-baja, como mucho tal vez habíamos viajado de la clase baja a la clase media. A veces pienso que sería preferible ser completamente pobre. Porque si eres de clase baja, aún tienes esperanza." (Vilas 2018: 92)

9 "Lo nuestro fue siempre el estabro, la pobreza, el hedor, la alienación, la enfermedad y la catástrofe." (Vilas 2018: 276)

same life. [...] Nor do I want to end up being somebody other than my father – I'm terrified of having my own identity. I'd rather be my father. (Vilas 2020: 165–6)<sup>10</sup>

A similar sort of parallel exists between the narrator and his mother: "My mother was pursuing social esteem, which was fleeting, and I am pursuing literary esteem, which is also fleeting." (Vilas 2020: 255)<sup>11</sup>

Generally speaking, Vilas's project is symptomatic of what appears to be a general tendency in recent autobiographically inspired works, namely to assume a more sympathetic stance vis-à-vis one's parents. In *Ordesa*, this perspective informs a passage that implicitly raises a claim of autobiographical truthfulness by repudiating the autofictional approach: "It would do us a lot of good to write about our families without any fiction creeping in, without storifying. Just recounting what happened, or what we think happened. People conceal their progenitors' lives." (Vilas 2020: 102)<sup>12</sup> This claim to veracity is further underscored by the insertion into the novel of a total of eight black-and-white photographs, six of which are more or less aleatory snapshots of Vilas's parents. Thus, commenting on an image of his mother and father dancing on a festive occasion (the photo had lain hidden in a box for many years), the narrator dwells on the fact that they have not left behind substantial evidence of their existence:

I have very few material objects of theirs, few gravitations of matter, such as photos. [...] The level of my parents' obliviousness to their own lives is an enigma to me. [...] The extent to which they obliterated their lives is a kind of art. My parents were a couple of Rimbauds: they rejected memory, they didn't think about themselves. Though the two of them went unnoticed, they did produce me, and they sent me to school and I learned to write, and now I'm writing their lives. That's where they went wrong – they should

10 "Él vendía poco textil y yo vendo pocos libros, somos el mismo hombre. [...] Estamos viviendo la misma vida, con contextos diferentes, pero es la misma vida. [...] Tampoco quiero llegar a ser alguien distinto de mi padre, me causa terror llegar a tener una identidad propia. Prefiero ser mi padre." (Vilas 2018: 210)

11 "Mi madre perseguía la estimación social, que se evaporó, y yo persigo la estimación literaria, que también se está evaporando." (Vilas 2018: 313)

12 "Nos vendría muy bien escribir sobre nuestras familias, sin ficción alguna, sin novelas. Solo contando lo que pasó, o lo que creemos que pasó. La gente oculta la vida de sus progenitores." (Vilas 2018: 127)

have left me to wallow in the most radical and complete and irremediable illiteracy. (Vilas 2020: 96–7)<sup>13</sup>

This passage exemplifies a common paradox in autosociobiographical texts: the narrating self typically and necessarily holds a ‘hegemonic’ position with regard to the ‘subalternity of the original class’, which as such cannot be articulated and is always already subsumed by the explanatory competence of the ‘educated’ narrator (Blome et al. 2022: 6). In this perspective, then, the relatively few photos included in *Ordesa*, testifying to a comparative lack of material memory, propel the narrator’s memorial and reconstructive activity.

Similar to procedures employed in a variant of autofiction dubbed *récit de filiation* by Dominique Viart, Vilas uses these images as nodal points for “archaeological reconstructions” of family memories within his narrative (Viart 2019: 11).<sup>14</sup> In fact, autosociobiographical works often include photographs or ekphrastic scenes (as does, for example, Ernaux’s *Les Années 2008*; see Blome 2020: 552; Venzon 2024: 139–48) in order to highlight temporal differences and instigate imaginative projections in the act of commemoration.<sup>15</sup> While photographs as material traces attest to an indexical ‘reality’, they also provide an occasion for the narrator to supply information, to imagine (or to speculate) what the circumstances were or might have been. This is precisely the function they serve in *Ordesa*: they confront the narrator with the realm of mystery and darkness that separates him from his parents’ existence in the past, especially prior to his own birth. This holds even more true for his relation to his grandparents, whose disappearance without material traces is allegorised as a subaltern social condition that precludes the very possibility of ‘having’ a family or familial memory:

13 “Me han quedado muy pocas cosas materiales de ellos, pocas gravitaciones de la materia, como las fotos. [...] El grado de inconsciencia de mis padres sobre sus propias vidas me parece un enigma. [...] El grado de omisión de sus propias vidas me parece arte. Fueron dos Rimbauds, ellos, mis padres: no querían la memoria, no pensaron a sí mismos. Fueron inadvertidos, pero me engendraron a mí, y me enviaron al colegio y aprendí a escribir, y ahora escribo sus vidas; se descuidaron ahí, debieron haberme abandonado en medio del más revolucionario y radical e inapelable analfabetismo.” (Vilas 2018: 120–21)

14 On the function of photography in auto(socio)biography, see Gudmundsdóttir 2003; Blome 2020: 553–7.

15 For a detailed discussion of the post-traumatic function of photographs in autofiction, see the classic study by Hirsch 1997.

I wouldn't recognise my grandfathers if they came back to life, because I never saw them while they were alive, plus I don't have a single photo and no one ever told me about them. I search for them now among the dead, and my hand fills with ash and excrement, and those are the symbols and heraldic crest of the global working class: ashes and excrement. And oblivion. (Vilas 2020: 148)<sup>16</sup>

As in the works of Annie Ernaux and other writers whose texts form part of the emerging canon of autosociobiography, the narrator of *Ordesa* repeatedly fleshes out the cultural tastes of a specific, historically situated class: the clothes, the furniture, the consumer goods that are typical attributes of the 1960s Spanish lower middle class in general, and his parents in particular (Vilas 2018: 136). There are also certain tell-tale habits such as the mother's (ruinous) obsession with the game of Bingo; when the author is awarded a literary prize, she even steals the prize money (Vilas 2018: 144). At times, Vilas's penchant for universalising aphorisms glosses over what often begins as observations of social or psychological peculiarities. For instance, his mother's incapacity to earn enough money is quickly turned into a near-universal condition, thus somewhat diluting the narrator's attempts at sociological description and analysis:

There was no way to make money. I think that's hereditary. I'm poor too. I don't have a pot to piss in – luckily, nobody's got a pot to piss in these days. And that can be liberating. If they're smart, young people will pursue a wandering life, chaos, job insecurity, and freedom. And skilled poverty, morally deactivated poverty – that is, group poverty. It's a good solution: poverty as a collective phenomenon, pooled having-not. (Vilas 2020: 116)<sup>17</sup>

16 "No reconocería a mis abuelos si volvieran a la vida porque nunca los vi mientras estuvieron vivos y porque no tengo ni una triste foto de ellos ni me hablaron de ellos. Los busco ahora entre los muertos, y mi mano se llena de ceniza y excrementos, y esos son los emblemas y la heráldica de la clase trabajadora universal: ceniza y excrementos. Y olvido." (Vilas 2018: 189)

17 "No había manera de hacer dinero. Y eso creo que es hereditario. Yo también soy pobre. No tengo donde caerme muerto, lo bueno es que ahora nadie tiene donde caerse muerto. Y eso puede ser una liberación. Ojalá los jóvenes busquen la vida errante, el caos, la inestabilidad laboral y la libertad. Y la pobreza apañada, la pobreza desactivada moralmente, es decir, la pobreza en sociedad. Es una buena solución: la pobreza como fundamento colectivo; el no-tener mancomunado." (Vilas 2018: 144)

To give yet another example of this type of universalising rhetoric: “If I touch my kitchen, I touch my mother’s soul. If I touch all the kitchens on earth, I touch the bondage of millions of women [...].” (Vilas 2020: 175)<sup>18</sup> Even though Vilas’s autobiographical account is a raw, heterodox, and often emotionally touching piece of writing, and even though its recuperation of a private past consistently emphasises the subject’s ties to a social and familial origin, the narrative is constrained by a solipsistic perspective and encumbered by a pervasive sense of immobility.

### **Carlos Pardo: *El viaje a pie de Johann Sebastian* (2014)**

In an interview about *Lejos de Kakania* [Far away from Kakania] (2019), the most recent instalment in his trilogy of structurally autonomous, autofictional coming-of-age novels, Carlos Pardo (\*1975) characterised his novelistic project as “a literary as well as a sociological experiment. I write my life like the symptom of an epoch. Not because my life is very interesting, but because it is a common one.” (qt. in Velázquez 2019)<sup>19</sup> Playing with the genres of the *Bildungsroman* and the picaresque, the first novel of the series, *Vida de Pablo*, paints a portrait of young, socially marginalised artists and writers as typical representatives of the author’s generation.<sup>20</sup> In *Lejos de Kakania*, meanwhile, Pardo tells a story in which high art and friendship function as a counterweight to a mediocre reality, a narrative explicitly inspired by the literary models of intellectual autobiography and socially inflected autofiction (Annie Ernaux, V.S. Naipaul). In another interview, Pardo commented as follows on his interest in the literary/autobiographical exploration of the issue of social mobility:

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18 “Si acaricio mi cocina, acaricio el alma de mi madre. Si acaricio todas las cocinas de la tierra, acaricio la esclavitud de millones de mujeres [...].” (Vilas 2018: 221)

19 “un experimento literario a la vez que sociológico. Escribo mi vida como un síntoma de época. No porque mi vida sea muy interesante, sino porque es común.”

20 It thus roughly conforms to the characteristics of “generational autobiographies” defined by John Downton Hazlett as “autobiographical forms that simultaneously make explicit the personal dimension of generational thought and the collective element in autobiographical discourse” (Downton Hazlett 1998: 6).

Change of class [desclasamiento]<sup>21</sup> is one of the great themes of literature: Rousseau, Stendhal... and so on up to Annie Ernaux, Édouard Louis, and Didier Eribon. I list only French writers because they seem to be the experts of the genre. But evidently it is a universal theme: Keller, Fontane, Naipaul, etc. I am interested in the different ways of approaching it. For example, change of class as an upward movement, which is often accompanied by 'shame'; but also the downward movement experienced by so many proletarianised writers, and the 'guilt' that goes with it. Or the demise of the dandy, which is beyond guilt and shame. (Santano 2024)<sup>22</sup>

In what follows, I will focus on the middle part of the series, *El viaje a pie de Johann Sebastian*, which contributes to the genre of autosociobiography in the form of a family narrative.<sup>23</sup> The communal and social orientation of this work is readily apparent, not least because the first-person narrator refers to his family in the first-person plural from the very beginning:

So we have two sick parents and five siblings who can't agree on anything. I am the youngest. The others are a year apart: Fernando, the oldest, is a guitarist and music producer; then there is Juan, ground crew at Barajas airport; Miguel, singer in Fernando's band; and Javier, an itinerant waiter. Seven years younger than Javier, I am a bookseller. None of us have gone to university. (Pardo 2016: 15)<sup>24</sup>

<sup>21</sup> The Spanish term is adapted from the French *déclassement*, which is much discussed in French sociology, where it frequently, if not always, carries negative connotations, in the sense of "loss" of class. See Bourdieu 1978.

<sup>22</sup> "El desclasamiento es uno de los grandes temas de la literatura: Rousseau, Stendhal... y así hasta Annie Ernaux, Edouard Louis o Didier Eribon. Cito solo franceses porque parecen los expertos del género. Pero evidentemente es un tema universal: Keller, Fontane, Naipaul, etc. Me interesan las diversas formas de enfocarlo. Por ejemplo, el desclasamiento hacia arriba, que muchas veces viene acompañado de la 'vergüenza'; pero también el desclasamiento hacia abajo de tantos escritores proletarizados, donde late la 'culpa.' O el desclasamiento del dandi, que está más allá de la culpa y la vergüenza."

<sup>23</sup> On recent re-elaborations of the genre of (auto-)fictional family narratives, see Artwińska et al. 2024.

<sup>24</sup> "Así que tenemos a dos padres enfermos y a cinco hermanos que no se ponen de acuerdo. Yo soy el pequeño. Los demás van con un año de diferencia: Fernando, el mayor, es guitarrista y productor musical; después va Juan, personal de muelle en el aeropuerto de Barajas; Miguel, cantante en el grupo de Fernando; y Javier, camarero itinerante. Siete años después de Javier, yo, librero. No tenemos estudios."

This tendency to see the self as part of a group applies not only to the social class of the family, in this case a rather poor one from the lower middle class, but also to the age cohort of the generation, which, as a narrative framing device, has recently made something of a comeback, supplying a broader pattern of meaning and cohesion after the demise of the grands récits (Weigel 2006: 108). Toward the end of the novel, the narrator joins his publisher (named Paca) at a dance club, where they find themselves among a group of like-minded writers and literary agents (Pardo 2014: 185). The generational perspective leads to a fusion of the self with the group, but also to a kind of sociological (self-)observation regarding the economically precarious status of the young 'creative class' and its "specific political-cultural habitus" (Weigel 2006: 93). Again, this observation is made in the first-person plural: "We, the copies, as we were dancing there, were the originals. We were the people. United by our tastes, united by consumption." (Pardo 2014: 187)<sup>25</sup>

The narrator thus articulates the symptom of what he himself calls the "simulacrum of youth," and he does so in the spirit of a sociology of taste somewhat reminiscent of Pierre Bourdieu. The latter is tied to a social formation and potential political consciousness that the narrator repeatedly links to the term *pueblo* (Pardo 2014: 150; 152-3) in an apparent attempt to re-signify this rather traditional concept of community or political subjecthood:

So, to sum up, when those who are precarious realise that they are poor [...], they will be able to wake up as a people and invent a new political force; that is, when the children of the weak middle class, be they students or not, [perennial] earners of the minimum wage, understand that with the years, with age, from thirty-five onwards, they will pass from being precarious to simply poor, the poor before the bourgeois imaginary, but without the strength of the proletariat, without forming a new social class, these poor, then, if they wake up, will get down to work. I hate to belong to a generation that grows old with such naivety.<sup>26</sup> (Pardo 2014: 187-8)

25 "Nosotros, las copias, allí, bailando, éramos los originales. Éramos pueblo. Unidos por nuestros gustos, unidos por el consumo."

26 "Así que, resumiendo, cuando los precarios se den cuenta de que son pobres [...] podrán despertarse como pueblo e inventar una nueva fuerza política; es decir, cuando los hijos de la débil clase media, estudiantes o no, mileuristas de antes, comprendan que con los años, con la edad, a partir de los treinta y cinco pasarán de precarios a simples pobres, los pobres anteriores al imaginario burgués, pero sin la fuerza del proletariado, sin formar una nueva clase social, estos pobres, entonces,

Yet in contrast to the fatalist *Ordesa*, Pardo's novel holds out the possibility of social and political emancipation even as it zeroes in on an economically depressed period in the recent history of Spain. On the one hand, the narrator stresses repeatedly the feelings of shame attached to poverty and the restrictions imposed by social class; on the other hand, the narrator's life is marked from early on by his interest in high culture, which is frequently mediated or complemented by popular media. For instance, an entire chapter is dedicated to the figure of the dandy, a social and cultural role model followed by the autofictional protagonist as well as his brothers. The dandy, as influentially defined by Charles Baudelaire in the long essay *Le Peintre de la vie moderne* (1863; *The Painter of Modern Life* 1964), transcends the constraints of social class and familial belonging, exemplifying instead a strategy to achieve socio-cultural distinction by bypassing, or not depending on, economic success.<sup>27</sup> Similar to Vilas, Pardo makes frequent use of aphoristic sentences, in this case, in order to provide a transhistorical definition of dandyism: "The dandy is a moralist who has not understood economic transaction." (Pardo 2014: 56)<sup>28</sup> While the dandy appears to be self-centred in his defiance of contemporary bourgeois society, Pardo's use of the concept suggests ways in which the self-centred genre of autofiction may open itself up not only to horizontal relations (family, community), but also to historical analogies – indeed, ever since the *bohème* of the nineteenth century, the figure of the artist has been represented in literature as originating from, and transcending, precarious economic circumstances (Bremerich 2018: 6).

Such historical analogies may in turn influence the self-fashioning of the subject. At the age of sixteen, for example, the narrator-protagonist is obsessed with a TV series called *The Strauss Dynasty* (dir. Marvin Chomsky, 1991) which embodies all his youthful aspirations: "aestheticism, myth, and utopia" (Pardo

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si despiertan, se pondrán manos a la obra. Odio pertenecer a una generación que envejece con tanta ingenuidad."

27 According to Baudelaire, the dandy represents "a new kind of aristocracy, all the more difficult to shatter as it will be based on the most precious, the most enduring faculties, and on the divine gifts which work and money are unable to bestow" (Baudelaire 1964: 28) "[une espèce nouvelle d'aristocratie, d'autant plus difficile à rompre qu'elle sera basée sur les facultés les plus précieuses, les plus indestructibles, et sur les dons célestes que le travail et l'argent ne peuvent conférer" (Baudelaire 1968: 11)].

28 "El dandi es un moralista que no ha comprendido la transacción económica."

2014:49)<sup>29</sup>. Describing this fascination in retrospect, the narrator suggests that his former behaviour of cultural mimicry followed the model provided by the patrilineal generational saga about the family of Austrian composers:

The trot of the monarchical revival of the Europe that Strauss senior knew, the youthful revolutionary effervescence of Strauss junior, and, already in his maturity, the nationalist dissatisfaction of a century in free fall. One sensed these things, above all, in the hair: from the Chateaubriand hairstyle to the dishevelled look with tragic sideburns typical of forty-eight, the nihilistic sideburns attached to the moustache of the failed revolution, and the patriotic beard of sixty-something. I tried to emulate the sideburns of the young Johann. (Pardo 2014: 49)<sup>30</sup>

In fact, the black-and-white author photograph in the inner book flap of *El viaje* still shows the author with those “nihilistic sideburns”. If the dandy is an anachronistic figure, the transtemporal analogy between Chateaubriand, the Baudelairean dandy, and the dandies of the novel is an effective and playful way to direct the reader’s attention not only towards the youthful desire to break free from one’s own time and circumstances, but also towards general patterns of social distinction. Art and literature (mediated by popular culture) set up models to be emulated, and thus serve the purpose of social individuation. Similarly, the narrator tells us about his (and his mother’s) obsession with two other decadence-themed films, Luchino Visconti’s *The Innocent* (1976, itself based on Gabriele D’Annunzio’s 1892 novel *L’innocente*), and Volker Schlöndorff’s adaptation of Proust’s *Un amour de Swann* (1984) (Pardo 2016: 49-50).

The figure of the dandy conveys a sense of simulated upward mobility (Pardo 2016: 57), already bearing the marks of disillusion, but also of revolt against normative conventions. With respect to the generation of the late ‘baby boomers’ born in the Spain of the 1970s, the posture of the dandy responds, according to Pardo, to the failure of the promise of normalcy and the constant

29 “esteticismo, mito y utopía”.

30 “El trote del renacer monárquico de la Europa que conoció Strauss padre, la efer-  
vescencia revolucionaria juvenil de Strauss hijo y, ya en la madurez de éste, la in-  
satisfacción nacionalista de un siglo en caída libre. Uno percibía estas cosas, sobre  
todo, en el cabello: del peinado Chateaubriand al revuelto con trágicas patillas del  
cuarenta y ocho, las nihilistas patillas unidas al bigote de la revolución fracasada,  
y la barba patriótica de sesenta y pico. Yo intenté emular las patillas del joven  
Johann.”

experience of precarious employment; it is “a group failure experienced as a personal decision.” (Pardo 2014: 58)<sup>31</sup> Building on the dialectical relation between the dandy and modern mass society already present in Baudelaire, Pardo’s Spanish dandies are a symptom of the unimpeded capitalism of the 1990s:

And his life as an object is an act of economic terrorism between surplus value and its degradation. The loss of exchange value suggests the fate of the individual in the age of greedy relationships. The dandy assumes the failure of normality in the epoch of the free market, of competition, of the masses. (Pardo 2014: 59)<sup>32</sup>

If in Baudelaire (or, for that matter, in Barbey D’Aurevilly’s *Du dandysme et de George Brummel* 1845), the individual dandy is already readable as a social type, Pardo’s ‘Marxist’ characterisation of this figure, sustained by terms such as “individual” and “epoch”, serves to abstract from the concrete family constellation and thus to suggest a broader, if only half-serious, sociological interpretation. Yet, in contrast to Vilas’s novel, Pardo’s autofictional self acknowledges that he has “definitively left” the social class he thought he would belong to forever, and that he has, at the same time, acquired a “collective consciousness” (Pardo 2014: 66).<sup>33</sup> Even if the protagonist is too “ugly” to fully succeed in embodying this type, the dandy’s posture of non-simultaneity, of anachronism, amounts to a political stance: “It is a subversion of the present. The anachronistic is political. [...] To be anachronistic is to be young in a closed world.” (Pardo 2014: 71)<sup>34</sup>

When the narrator eventually leaves this phase of (collective) dandyism behind, its inherent anachronism is now transferred to the function of literature itself. As a coming-of-age-narrative, *El viaje* describes the genesis of a literary author – Carlos Pardo – who, as a youth, has turned to literature and poetry precisely as a means to transcend his social milieu and circumstances: “In a

31 “un fracaso de grupo vivido como una decisión personal”.

32 “Y su vida como objeto es un acto de terrorismo económico entre so plusvalía y su degradación. La pérdida de valor de cambio sugiere el destino del individuo en la época de las relaciones ávidas. El dandi asume el fracaso de la normalidad en la época del libre mercado, de la competencia, de la masa.”

33 “toma de conciencia colectiva”.

34 “Es una subversión de la actualidad. Lo anacrónico es político. [...] Ser anacrónico es ser joven en un mundo clausurado. Y resistirse.”

sense, literature was a way of inventing a past of my own, [...] so alien (because I didn't want my life to have anything to do with my circumstances) that it compensated me for being the loser I was beginning to know I was." (Pardo 2014: 98–9)<sup>35</sup> Again, this individual strategy, eventually resulting in the narrator's becoming an author, is echoed by a general "sociological phenomenon" (Pardo 2014: 99)<sup>36</sup>: His friends from college, too, have become members of the 'creative' class in reaction to society's failed promise of equal opportunities. If the topics of the dandy and of literary/creative practice embody this principle of anachronism on the level of the novel's characters – both through the social persona of the dandy itself and through the recovery of this type from the culture of the nineteenth century – the novel features yet another, more sustained element of temporal achronicity, as we will now see.

In *Ordesa*, the narrator has the (somewhat unmotivated) habit of calling his family members by the names of classical composers, so that his father is consistently referred to as "Johann Sebastián Bach" (Vilas 2018: 228). In the case of Pardo's novel, its puzzling title alludes to the long voyage on foot from Arnstadt to Lübeck that Johann Sebastian Bach undertook in 1705 in order to meet the organist Dieterich Buxtehude. This event is the subject of an entire dedicated chapter, even though it lacks any explicit connection to the rest of the autofictional narrative. Yet subtle allusions to Bach's self-realisation through art as well as the compositional method of the fugue (Pardo 2016: 133) encourage the reader to look for parallels. This way of transcending the individual's life story and its familial and generational context suggests an intertextual proximity to other, comparable stories of social ascent; in short, it creates a "community of similar life paths" (Blome 2020: 549). In this sense, the autosociobiographical dimension of the novel goes beyond the immediate sense of social and/or familial embeddedness: it effectively constructs a historical and cultural echo chamber for the narrator's personal experiences.

This approach is also evident when the narrator notes the absence of a *pueblo* as a political entity: "We weren't the people, we weren't those at the bottom, we were the population." (Pardo 2014: 158)<sup>37</sup> To counter this lacuna, he imaginatively connects with a virtual community of "unreal persons" (Pardo

35 "En cierto sentido, la literatura era una manera de inventar un pasado propio, [...] de tan ajeno (porque yo no quería que mi vida tuviera que ver con mis circunstancias), compensara el perdedor que empezaba a saber que yo era."

36 "fenómeno sociológico".

37 "No éramos pueblo, no éramos los de abajo, éramos población."

2014: 160)<sup>38</sup>, who, like himself (or his brother Javier), were autobiographical writers – from Montaigne via Doris Lessing to Nathalie Sarraute. Unlike Vilas, Pardo's young self and narrator is sustained by an emphatic notion of the practice of literature: "What I do is my main freedom, my intimate detachment with respect to work, family, and limitations." (Pardo 2014: 97)<sup>39</sup>

Significantly, the novel's penultimate chapter takes the form of a (likely fictional) diary written by the narrator's mother, in which she describes the subordinate position preordained for women of her class and generation: "I am the typical mother, like many of my era, who is only good for being a housewife and mother." (Pardo 2014: 217)<sup>40</sup> By repeatedly opening up his narrative to other subjective positions and historical exempla, Pardo suggests that these analogies and strategies of estrangement or distancing may amount to a literary sociology of the self and the family in the age of liberal democracy. Rejecting the official ideal of 'free choice,' the narrator proposes a self that is happy to come to terms with, and to transcend, the constraints of its social origins.

Tellingly, the narrator cites the example of the ape Rotpeter in Kafka's story *Ein Bericht für eine Akademie* (1917) ("A Report to an Academy" 1983; the text is often read as a parable for the condition of the artist). Rotpeter is content to settle for an *Ausweg*, a way out, a concept used in Kafka's text as a way to ironise the idealist idea of *Bildung* in autobiographical narratives (Kilcher/Kremer 2004: 56).<sup>41</sup> The ape's defence of this strategy chimes with Pardo's critique of the ideology of 'free choice', the fallacy of the autonomous self:

I fear that perhaps you do not quite understand what I mean by 'way out.' I use the expression in its fullest and most popular sense. I deliberately do not use the word 'freedom'. I do not mean the spacious feeling of freedom on all sides. [...] In passing: may I say that all too often men are betrayed by the word freedom. And as freedom is counted among the most sublime

38 "personas irreales".

39 "Esto que hago es mi principal libertad, mi íntimo desapego respecto al trabajo, a la familia y a las limitaciones."

40 "Soy la típica madre, como muchas de mi época, que solo sirve para ser ama de casa y madre."

41 Kilcher/Kremer (2004: 56) argue that Kafka here subverts the teleological imperative implicit in Franz Grillparzer's *Selbstbiographie*.

feelings, so the corresponding disillusionment can be also sublime (Kafka 1983: 253).<sup>42</sup>

The reader may notice that Kafka's 'way out' resonates with one of the first sentences in the Bach-section of *El viaje*, which emphasises the striving for an *Ausweg* of the young J.S. Bach: "The boy felt the joy of running away, having a vague idea of the itinerary." (Pardo 2014: 105)<sup>43</sup> And, of course, the Spanish word for 'fugue' – *fuga* (Pardo 2014: 133) – signifies not only a polyphonic compositional technique; it also means 'flight' in this case, the escape from one's origins. It is through such intratextual links and semantic possibilities that the novel creates a network of correspondences embedding the individual in broader, virtual communities.

## Conclusion

In the novels under consideration here, two male authors of different generations – Pardo and Vilas – represent the autobiographical/autofictional self in relation to the social and economic crises and transformations of recent Spanish history. Both texts exemplify a pronounced relational approach to the notion of autobiographical writing, which is often superficially associated with the "myth of autonomy" or the "illusion of self-determination" (Eakin 1999: 43; 61). Whereas Vilas binds the self primarily to the memory of his parents and their social standing during the Franco years, Pardo's narrator relates his autofictional self primarily to his siblings, since he is more interested in the *habitus* and existential problems of his own generation during the volatile 1990s. In contrast to *Ordesa*'s model of a narrative of filiation, Pardo's *El viaje* emphasises the interplay between social conditioning and literary self-creation in both the individual and the generational sense. While the 'return of social class' appears to be a broader phenomenon, the circulation and variation of the literary form of autosociobiography needs to be understood in relation to

42 "Ich habe Angst, daß man nicht genau versteht, was ich unter Ausweg verstehe. Ich gebrauche das Wort in seinem gewöhnlichsten und vollsten Sinn. Ich sage absichtlich nicht Freiheit. Ich meine nicht dieses große Gefühl der Freiheit nach allen Seiten. [...] Nebenbei: mit Freiheit betrügt man sich unter Menschen allzuoft. Und so wie die Freiheit zu den erhabensten Gefühlen zählt, so auch die entsprechende Täuschung zu den erhabensten." (Kafka 1986: 142)

43 "El muchacho sintió la alegría de huir con una vaga idea del itinerario."

specific circumstances, for even a ‘universal’ neoliberal system (as criticised by both Vilas and Pardo) operates according to local and temporal specificities (Twellmann/Lammers 2023).

While both authors go beyond the subjective focus of ‘traditional’ autofiction, they adopt different formal and narrative approaches: whereas Vilas uses a loose diary-like structure broken up into 167 short fragments (mostly one to two pages long), focussing on specific dates, memories, or events, Pardo’s text is divided into six larger narrative units and a short epilogue. Two of these chapters (“Johann Sebastian’s Journey on Foot” and “My Mother’s Small Diary”) are not narrated from the point of view of the autofictional narrator: the chapter on Bach features an omniscient voice, and the mother’s diary is told from a first-person perspective. The novel’s structural composition might indeed be likened to a fugue, insofar as motifs are variously repeated and the centre of narrative attention is often displaced from the ‘protagonist’ towards other characters and time periods. On the level of literary form, too, this relational and multi-directional poetics exemplifies how the narrative self conceives of itself not only in relation to family, social class, and generational experience, but also in relation to cultural and literary models that universalise the local and temporal specificities, which in turn makes it possible to assume a distanced, ‘sociological’ perspective on one’s own life, class, generation, and family. As a strategy for universalising the personal, Vilas relies more on the affective involvement of the reader, whereas Pardo creates a network of intertextual relations and references that constantly play off the personal against analogical cases. The cultural/literary nature of the latter underscores the importance of literature as a means of *Bildung* – in the sense of a confrontation with cultural difference that allows to imaginatively transcend one’s own social origin. Both authors negotiate the personal experience of poverty as part of growing up in lower-middle class circumstances; while Vilas’s text is marked by sentiments of nostalgia and an often fatalist tone, Pardo’s adopts a more self-ironical perspective, insisting on the transformative potential of art and literature.

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