

Mario Vargas Llosa's *Conversation in the Cathedral*

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A recent review of the English translation of Vargas Llosa's third novel sums up a frequent misinterpretation of the Peruvian writer's work: ". . . a long layered tale about indolence, greed, violence, corruption, sexual perversion and general animal cunning in modern Peru." Since the appearance of his first novel, *La ciudad y los perros* (translated as *The Time of the Hero*) in 1963, many critics have focused their attention almost exclusively on the more sensational elements of his literary production, and Manuel Pedro González's reaction ("the tiresome perversity of language typical of lavatories and brothels")² is indicative of the attitude of many scholars. In part this can be explained by the *succès de scandale* generated by the public burning of a thousand copies of *The Time of the Hero* in the grounds of the Leoncio Prado Military College in Lima (setting for the novel), since this has undoubtedly haunted the reception of Vargas Llosa's subsequent work. This unfortunate process has been further abetted by the highlighting of the more "colorful" episodes in Vargas Llosa's novels, which has resulted in the impression that the writer's overriding concern is to show merely the sordid and perverse aspects of life in contemporary Peru.

Without any doubt this strong—and at times overbearing—interest in the more unusual details of human sexuality is a common ingredient of Vargas Llosa's work, but fortunately, in the last analysis, this represents a relatively insignificant feature of his novels. There are far more important (but less spectacular) qualities in the Peruvian writer's work, and in fact no better compendium of these can be found than *Conversation in the Cathedral* itself. The intention of this paper, then, is to outline and explain the more significant aspects of Vargas Llosa's major thematic, personal, and structural concerns, in an effort to help the reader better understand the craftsmanship of Mario Vargas Llosa.

Few contemporary Latin American novelists have been as expansive in writing about their personal interpretation of literary and political theory as Vargas Llosa. The essence of this former aspect can be summarized quite simply: the writer is basically a rebel, a man who is unhappy with the world that he sees around him, and who therefore writes in order to make people conscious of the problems facing their society. The corollary of this interpretation deals with the writer's own situation: having already illustrated society's ills it is now time to reveal his own obsessions, or, to use Vargas Llosa's own expression, "to exorcize one's personal devils."³

This twin objective has been present in all of the Peruvian novelist's work: the early collection of short stories, *Los jefes*, 1959 ("The Chiefs"), is based directly upon early experiences of Vargas Llosa in both Arequipa and Lima; *The Time of the Hero*, 1963, was inspired by his own two-year stay in the Leoncio Prado, and the Military College's strict discipline undoubtedly served as the basis for his most recent novel *Pantaleón y las visitadoras*, 1972 ("Pantaleón and the Lady Visitors"); *The Green House*, 1966, is also based on personal memories—his youthful experiences at the brothel of the same name, and his visit to Santa María de Nieva (where he in fact met one of the

protagonists of his novel, Jum, and where he also witnessed at first hand the nuns' expedition to "rescue" the young Indian girls; finally, his novelette *Los cachorros*, 1967 ("The Young Pups"), springs from his own childhood in the exclusive district of Miraflores, and from a newspaper cutting that had intrigued him.

This trend of "exorcising personal devils" is continued in *Conversation in the Cathedral*, which is based on two unrelated recollections of Vargas Llosa. The title of the novel derives from a four-hour conversation between Ambrosio and the son of his former employee after an accidental meeting following years of separation. This conversation extends throughout the entire novel, and constitutes the basic structure of the work, around which numerous subplots are intricately woven. The bar where they chat, "La Catedral," is based exclusively on a memory of a dingy bar in Miraflores, "El Patio," which Vargas Llosa frequented in his youth. The second source of inspiration revolves around another seemingly unimportant recollection of the Peruvian writer, who once had to go to a dog pound to rescue his pet animal. This situation is adopted by Vargas Llosa, who depicts Ambrosio as a man broken in body and spirit, forced to beat the captured animals to death in order to scrape together a miserable existence. These two events, then, despite appearing rather trite in their content, combined to provide the initial creative spark for the novel.

Both these unrelated incidents, then, appealed to Vargas Llosa's imagination, as did the newspaper cutting which provided inspiration for *Los cachorros*. More important, however, are Vargas Llosa's personal reflections on life during the regime of Manuel Odría, who ruled Peru from 1948 to 1956. Just as his stay in the Military Academy had thrust upon him the necessity of portraying its atmosphere, so too did his years at San Marcos University in Lima—which coincided with the Odría dictatorship—offer him an abundance of material for his work. The intention of the novel, he claims, is to reflect faithfully life in the 1950s under Odría's rule: "In this work I am attempting to reflect the social atmosphere of Peru during the eight-year rule of Odría: that mild but incredibly corrupt dictatorship that I experienced at first hand during my college years in Lima, and the mud of which—in one way or another—splattered all of us. But it is not a political novel: rather it is the reflection on many levels (social, human, erotic, racial and political as well) of Peru during this period."⁴ It is this blending of isolated incidents with Vargas Llosa's intense personal experiences which continue the importance of the "personal devils," and which, in *Conversation in the Cathedral*, offers the most harmonious expression to date of fiction and reality in the works of Vargas Llosa.

Unlike all of Vargas Llosa's other novels, which concentrate on one, or at most two, geographical locations, *Conversation in the Cathedral* now presents a wider, more encompassing view of Peruvian society. As in the majority of his earlier works, Lima is again used as the center of Vargas Llosa's attention, but this time his gaze extends further afield in a determined effort to incorporate as many representative regions of Peru as possible. True to his intention of providing a truly faithful portrayal of life in Peru during the Odría Administration, Vargas Llosa uses scenes set in the sierra and on the coast, in other large cities and in several small towns. Thus, alongside his description of the capital, and in particular his representation of Miraflores, we also encounter graphic accounts of life in Arequipa, Cuzco, Pucallpa, Ica, Camaná, Chíncha, and Trujillo.

More important in this vast mural of Peruvian society, however, is the fact that the reader now finds a profound investigation of life in the different, and rigidly separated, social strata of Peru. University life at San Marcos is described in great detail, and a thorough account of the upper class social conditions of Miraflores is also provided. At the same time though, and for the first occasion in any of Vargas Llosa's works, the reader now encounters finely-etched portraits of life in several working class areas. Students and assassins, sumptuous haciendas and seedy bars, ministers and prostitutes are all to be found in this complex work. A noteworthy feature of the novel is the lack of Indian protagonists, but this shortcoming is more than compensated for by the vast array of scenes and characters. In *Conversation in the Cathedral*, then, Vargas Llosa has incorporated many of the scenes found in his other works, but his welcome additions combine to offer a work which far surpasses any other attempt at portraying contemporary Peruvian society, and in Vargas Llosa's case it is to be doubted if he will again produce such an immense variety of social conditions, characters, and geographical locations.

Probably the most noticeable feature of Mario Vargas Llosa's description of Peruvian society is his excellent portrayal of the upper-middle class, the "gente decente" or "decent" people as he calls them, the society which he experienced at firsthand during his youth in Miraflores. By narrating the life of Santiago Zavalita, Vargas Llosa presents his finest portrayal to date of the faults and inspirations (although more often the former) of this elite. Santiago Zavalita (who in many ways resembles Vargas Llosa) tries to break away from the artificiality of this life as soon as he enters San Marcos University, and eventually completes this separation when he obtains a badly paid position as a reporter on an obscure newspaper. The "golden future" envisaged by his father fails to materialize, and Zavalita underlines this lack of concern for material wealth and an "easy" life by living in a small apartment, and by marrying a nurse from the provinces—a member of the working class, as his family soon points out.

The Zavala family, representatives of this social elite, cannot begin to understand Santiago's desire to find a more fulfilling form of existence, and all end up by despising him for his rejection of their extensive privileges. Moreover, they are unable to see anything inherently wrong in their way of life. In his attempt to provide a valid document reflecting this society which he knew so well, Vargas Llosa offers scores of scenes from everyday life in the Zavala household, all of which reveal the frivolous and superficial life of this social class. Zavalita's brother, for instance, is an incorrigible snob who on one occasion takes advantage of his socially superior position to drug the family maid in order to force her to sleep with him. Zavalita's brother-in-law, "Popeye" Arévalo, is a similarly shallow character who takes full advantage of his social position to attend all the major functions that a "decent" person should do. On one occasion he even takes Teté to the "Grill Bolívar," which in fact is the same restaurant that Albert (the central character in *The Time of the Hero*) visited with his fiancée. Both Albert and "Popeye" do everything that young men of such high standing would be expected to do, and pay little attention at all to anybody of an "inferior" station.

One of the most moving scenes, and probably representing the climax of Vargas Llosa's portrayal of the hypocrisy of the Zavala family, comes when Santiago brings his wife Ana to meet his family for the first time. His mother is unable to hide her dislike for Ana, and she seems to regard her son's marriage to a girl who, after all, is from an inferior social class, as a personal insult. The evening progresses very uncomfortably until, alone at one point

with her son, doña Zoila explains her intense disappointment: "Don't you realize? Can't you see? How am I ever going to accept the idea of my son married to a woman who could be his maid?"; II, 243. This family crisis shatters the image of the "big happy family" and, as José Miguel Oviedo has observed, "it reveals the underlying layer of moral turpitude which lies behind the façade presented by the symbols of Fermín Zavala's status . . ."⁵

It must be noted, however, that this work is no mere "thesis novel," designed just to show that these social abuses are restricted solely to the "decent" classes, for Vargas Llosa makes it obvious that these ills permeate all levels of Peruvian society. Admittedly, the Peruvian novelist reveals his deep personal disillusion with life in the Miraflores "jet set," but his purpose is not merely to condemn this particular social stratum, but rather to show that similar levels of corruption and selfishness are found in all levels of the nation's social structure.

The picture of Peruvian society presented by Vargas Llosa is certainly a bleak one: there are many imposing barriers between the many different levels, and social mobility really appears unknown there. Furthermore, as a result of the clearly defined social standings, all members of Peruvian society know exactly what rung of the complex social ladder that they belong to, and seem able to recognize immediately the position of all other people that they meet. Meaningful communication between representatives is virtually impossible, since the members of the different strata usually remain in groups consisting of their "equals." Consequently, the only form of communication between different levels is, as Oviedo has shown, "vertical communication: from the oppressor to the oppressed."⁶ This results in a situation in which there is always someone further down the social scale on whom it is possible to vent one's rage (as shown by the many examples of Cayo Bermudez's brutality to social "inferiors"), or one in which it is possible to adulate a person higher up the social ladder (as in the case of Ambrosio's devotion to don Fermín).

Moreover, although at first sight it appears that the main attention of Vargas Llosa's wrath is directed at the powerful upper-middle class, it is nevertheless true that all conclusions that the reader might make concerning this elite are equally applicable to the lower levels of Peruvian society. The relationship between the black chauffeur Ambrosio and don Hilario shows that there is an amazing lack of social morality among the lower classes. Ambrosio buys a seedy funeral parlor from Hilario, but soon the business collapses and Ambrosio desperately asks Hilario for a position in his transport company. He even offers to take over the menial job of watchman, presently occupied by a mentally retarded man, but Hilario refuses, claiming that he does not pay the guard anything—he merely lets him sleep in the building as remuneration for his services. In fact, he claims, he would be foolish to hire Ambrosio, for if the chauffeur were to find a better paid position elsewhere, he would leave Hilario, who would then have great difficulty in finding another watchman to work for nothing. Faced with the many obvious abuses in this society, where everyone exploits and mistreats his social "inferiors," while prostituting himself before his "superiors," no better résumé of Peruvian society can be found than the words of Santiago: ". . . in this country, anyone who doesn't screw himself up, usually ends up by screwing everyone else . . ." (I, 166).

It would appear that the central theme of *Conversation in the Cathedral* is the pitiful state of contemporary society in Peru, for which there is apparently no saving grace. In all of Vargas Llosa's other works one can find explicit, highly critical references to Peru. However, in no other novel of Vargas

Llosa does the reader encounter either the quantity or, more important, the ferocity of the attacks on Peru found in *Conversation in the Cathedral*. In this novel, criticism is found of what Vargas Llosa obviously regards as the essential ingredients of Peruvian society. The Church, for example, although not as great a center of attraction as in *The Green House*, nevertheless is heavily censured; the ever-important phenomenon of militarism is illustrated by the stranglehold which Odría keeps on Peru; even the code of *machismo* comes in for heavy criticism. All these aspects of national life, together with the stultifying existence which results from the hopelessly outdated and stratified social structure, are used to show the complete and utter breakdown of all aspirations for a better Peru, a fact underlined at the very beginning of the novel: "Even the rain was screwed-up in this country" (I, 16). This impression is mercilessly repeated throughout the novel, as Santiago on numerous occasions expands on his view of national sterility: "Whether Peru is governed by dogmatists or by intellectuals is irrelevant—Peru will always be a screwed-up country . . . It began badly, and will end disastrously" (I, 161). The numerous examples of coarse language used to describe the state of Peruvian society indicates the deep frustration which the author feels on considering the reality of Peru. The cynical, but somewhat lighthearted criticism of "The Chiefs" has been replaced here by a deep anguish, aptly expressed by a form of verbal violence not found elsewhere in his work.

Mario Vargas Llosa has often been criticized for his lack of solutions to the "Peruvian problem," but the fact is that, if there are no constructive suggestions or solutions offered in *Conversation in the Cathedral*, it is because he sincerely feels that there are none. The question which continues to crop up in the novel ("At what time exactly had Peru screwed itself up?") is answered on the same page that the question is first raised: "Peru screwed up, Carlitos screwed up, everybody is screwed up. Consider this: there is no solution" (I, 13).

A careful study of Vargas Llosa's work reveals how the vague rumblings of discontent visible in his first collection of short stories has now been transformed into a harsh and extremely bitter reflection on Peruvian life and society in general. If the Peruvian writer felt uncertain as to how he should harness his personal discontent in 1959, the same cannot now be said about *Conversation in the Cathedral*. This novel, then, marks a personal as well as a literary triumph. For the first time in his career he seems fully aware of the gravity of the situation, hence the violent, anguished tone: "There are no saving graces in *Conversation in the Cathedral*, nor do we see signs of rebellion or nobility in any of the characters. Rather, it is a novel of complete abjection, of failure. It is as if now nothing could be saved—because nothing is really worth it."⁷

One of the most disconcerting aspects about the so-called "new Latin American novel" for western readers is the complex structure used by many contemporary Latin American writers, since in many cases the novel does not follow the structural considerations of traditional literary practices. As a result, many critics feel uncomfortable with the works that they are treating, and viewed in this light *Conversation in the Cathedral* is no exceptional case. Despite this lack of comprehension, though, the careful reader of Vargas Llosa's many statements on literary theory can see that, by means of the ultra-complex structure of his work, the Peruvian writer is in fact attempting the ambitious—and obviously impossible—plan of conveying to the reader *all* aspects of the reality of this society, of writing the "total novel." As a result, then, "his entire battery of novelistic techniques, as well as all his literary resources, are employed exclusively in order to make reality more real to us."⁸

This intention of Vargas Llosa is assisted in *Conversation in the Cathedral* by all the virtuoso writing techniques encountered in his other works. By means of the dialogue between Ambrosio and Zavalita, which extends throughout the entire novel, Vargas Llosa develops many plots and subplots, all of which are neatly dovetailed around this unusual structure. During the conversation between the two characters Vargas Llosa allows both recollections and interior monologues to exist autonomously alongside the account of the lives of Ambrosio and Zavalita. This autonomous development is at first extremely confusing. For, once Ambrosio or Zavalita even fleetingly recall a past event, even though the protagonist may forget about it immediately, the recollection continues to develop by itself, just as naturally as if Zavalita was giving a full account of it. Thus, when he mentions his college years at San Marcos, even though he passes on to something completely different, his recollection continues to exist, unleashing a large store of hidden memories which are then recounted alongside the actual ongoing conversation between Ambrosio and Zavalita. In *Conversation in the Cathedral*, then, all loose threads are developed, all unconnected thoughts, memories and even memories of memories are gently spun together by Vargas Llosa in order to present a truly representative and all-embracing mural of Peruvian reality of the 1950s.

But this process is even more complicated, for these unsolicited memories which continue to exist long after Zavalita or Ambrosio have forgotten about them—and even the central dialogue itself—are both chronologically and spatially separated. Thus, several narrative threads are maintained at the same time, all of which are not necessarily in any given chronological order. It is almost as if the writer had written four or five different narrative threads, developed them in the traditional manner, and then divided them up into many small sections, which he then interpolates. Yet, however complicated this may at first appear, the work undoubtedly acquires greater meaning and dimension, provided that the task of piecing together the jigsaw puzzle of the novel is not too taxing. The reader obviously has to study the text more closely and, at almost any given moment, must be fully conscious of the many different narrative threads, while necessarily having to store memories of *future* developments in his mind. This role of accomplice of the writer undoubtedly helps the reader to a more profound understanding of the work for, which his necessary cooperation and patience, the mysteries of the novel are soon solved. As a result, although *Conversation in the Cathedral* is “a fragmented reality, nevertheless it becomes exceptionally clear when studied in its totality.”⁹ Moreover, due to Vargas Llosa’s extensive narrative coverage of many different social strata, geographical locations and vast assortment of characters, it also represents the Peruvian writer’s most successful attempt to date of reaching this impossible target, the “novela total.”

This novel of Vargas Llosa is thus both a perfect showcase for all the structural techniques and thematic obsessions found in his other work, as well as being the true culmination of his personal anguish for Peru. He himself has admitted that with this novel he has reached the peak of his creativity, and that following this novel “he will not aspire to such immense literary efforts . . . he will be more humble.”¹⁰ This represents a great loss to Latin-American literature, but is understandable, given the vast undertaking required to produce *Conversation in the Cathedral*. His intention to describe life under the Odría regime had been smoldering for many years before he actually began to write the novel, since Odría’s Administration corresponded with an important formative period in his life.

Despite the objection of many critics, this novel, far from being a work concerned with the sensational, should in fact be regarded as an important social document. As the Peruvian critic José Miguel Oviedo has so ably pointed out, *Conversation in the Cathedral* is not an easy or a pleasant book to read—nor is it intended as such: “Rather, it is that specific mature work which novelists sometimes promise themselves: the unpleasant novel which they have composed with anger, with deep-lying truth, and with an unbearable nostalgia. The Odría dictatorship robbed Vargas Llosa of his youth and of his innocence. On the political level it completed the moral destruction which the Leoncio Prado Military College had begun. As a result then, this novel constitutes a tremendous revenge, a masterly revenge.”¹¹

NOTES

¹R. Z. Shepherd, “Caged Condor” (Review of *Conversation in the Cathedral*), *Time*, February 17, 1965, p. 64.

²Manuel Pedro González, “Impresión de *La ciudad y los perros*,” in *Coloquio sobre la novela hispanoamericana*, ed. Ivan A. Schulman et al. (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1967), p. 104. All translations of Spanish quotations are my own. Quotations from *Conversación en la Catedral* are from the edition published in Barcelona by Seix Barral in 1969.

³This term appears to have been first used by Vargas Llosa in a speech given in August of 1966, and subsequently published by him in a pamphlet entitled *La novela* (Montevideo: Fundación de Cultura Universitaria, 1968), p. 5.

⁴Luis A. Díez, “Vargas Llosa: *Conversación en la Cathedral*,” *Cuadernos Hispanoamericanos*, 81 (1970), p. 719.

⁵José Miguel Oviedo, *Mario Vargas Llosa: la invención de una realidad* (Barcelona: Barral Editores, 1970), p. 207.

⁶Oviedo, p. 219.

⁷Heberto Sánchez, “*Conversación en la Catedral*, novela del desaliento,” *Mundo Nuevo*, 50 (1970), p. 81.

⁸Gerald Martin, “Vargas Llosa: nueva novela y realismo,” *Norte*, 12 (1971), p. 117.

⁹Alfredo Matilla Rivas, “*Conversación en la Catedral*, estructura y estrategias,” in *Homenaje a Mario Vargas Llosa*, ed. H. F. Giacomani and José Miguel Oviedo (New York: Las Américas, 1971), p. 74.

¹⁰Oviedo, p. 185.

¹¹Oviedo, p. 237.