

THE USES OF HISTORY IN VARGAS LLOSA'S *HISTORIA DE  
MAYTA*

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*[They] wrote so-called histories... I shall be a more honest liar than my predecessors, for I am telling you frankly, here and now, that I have no intention whatsoever of telling the truth.*

Lucian

When Vallejos, Mayta, and the ragged band of schoolboys, fired by reading Marx and Trotsky, take it upon themselves to bring the revolution to Peru, the townfolk in the sleepy provincial backwater of Jauja are understandably unimpressed. The grandiose plans rapidly degenerate into farcical realization: *Desde mi cuarto los vi y pensé que ensayaban para Fiestas Patrias*, says Don Joaquín Zamudio; *dije ya se viene otro sablazo con el cuento de la kermesse, el desfile o la representación*, says Don Ernesto Durán Huarcaya (pp. 258-59). The self-consciously ironic substratum underlying the reported snatches of interviews gives the reader pause. It is painfully clear that this blindly dedicated band of revolutionaries, for all their obsession with the historical imperatives of Marxist theory, has not gauged the historical moment correctly and thus their attempt to bring class consciousness to Peru will founder against the blank disinterest of the very masses they hope to uplift. Their attempt is dismissed as a nine-days wonder, and they are soon forgotten, lost to the

historical record. The most notable feature of the brief uprising remains the recollection of how badly they marched, a typical small-town failing viewed with indulgence by onlookers. Further, the narrator's ironical construction of the doomed rebellion reflects his mordant delight in the incidence that the participants' incandescent revolutionary fervor can be mistaken for a celebration of the very state they wish to overthrow. There is conscious artistry employed both in narrative tone and in choice of metaphor — *la kermesse, el desfile o la representación*. The novel itself in many ways, very much like an obscurely drawn provincial fair of personalities, a parade of slightly grotesque interviewees, or a fictionally enhanced representation of their evidence as filtered through an ironically-tinted mind. The narrator repeatedly insists on his determination to search all pertinent historical evidence carefully, *para mentir con conocimiento de causa* and he assures all the witnesses he interviews that one of them will have a place in the completed fiction: *Tampoco figurará en la historia el Subteniente Vallejos ni Mayta ni ninguno de los protagonistas nadie podrá identificar en ella lo que realmente ocurrió* (p. 232). By these words the novel of representations is given a further twist. Does this slyly voyeuristic narrator lie to us, the reader of this novel of a drip-drip novel-in-progress, or did he lie to the fictional characters/historical witnesses from whom he prods and pries private memories? Is the issue decidable? Does it matter? *Este punto de la historia... tampoco se aclarará*, the narrator would respond in one of his irritatingly coy moods.

Yet the question returns; the narrator's constant evocation of the thinned issues of history and fiction, of fact and representation, of a past repeated, as Marx reminds us, as tragedy and as farce, signify more than the presence of a *leit motiv* in the work. Of such entanglements the web of the novel is woven. *Historia de Mayta* reads the cover of the book, and in smaller print, *novela*: historical fiction, the fiction of history, intensified by the ambiguity of the Spanish word *historia* which absorbs both modes of representing reality. In the title, Vargas Llosa provides the central conceit for the work itself, a conceit which is also, inevitably, highly ironized. For as Françoise Gaillard has observed of another unravelled web of historical reconstruction, a twofold moral necessarily applies:

— In the first place: an historical narrative can only be written if the subject's position is unequivocally marked. The question of the totalizing subject must therefore be resolved before any narrative of this type can be undertaken.

— In the second place: this initial necessity is never fulfilled (pp. 143-44).

In the first place, *historia de Mayta* suggests a holistic form, a totalizing subject captured by the force of a total narrative that renders all essential facts into a meaningful and complete structure. In the second place, *novela* decries the presumptuousness of History as a form or a force for shaping meaning. *Historia de Mayta: novela* reveals a history full of holes, a parade of misunderstood facts, a mistaken identification with a valid representation. *Fiestas patrias* indeed!

In his own rethinking of the meaning and uses of history, Foucault calls attention to the work of a Nietzschean genealogist who, *if he listens to history, he finds that there is "something altogether different" behind things: not a timeless and essential secret, but the secret that they have no essence or that their essence was fabricated in a piecemeal fashion from alien forms* (p. 142). Vargas Llosa calls attention to the fabrication and also to the holes in the web.

Julian Barnes does something similar in his Flaubertian anti-biographical novel about Flaubert, and he defines the process in related terms: *You can define a net in one of two ways, depending on your point of view. Normally, you would say that it is a meshed instrument designed to catch fish. But you could, with no great injury to logic, reverse the image and define a net as ... a collection of holes tied together with string* (p. 38). What good is a collection of holes? Of what use are snide and paradoxical reflections on unverifiable facts in a construction that is admittedly and self-consciously fictional from beginning to end? If for the somewhat unlikable narrator of *Historia de Mayta* such questions are moot for Vargas Llosa, a deeply moral author with a well-documented concern for the problematics of the total fiction,<sup>1</sup> they most certainly are not. Nevertheless, it would be a serious mistake to read Vargas Llosa's call for a total fiction in terms of a simplistic or reductionist espousal of continuity, synthesis, or a single, sovereign form, and one helpful way of approaching this work would be to consider it in terms of what Foucault describes as a mastery of the historical sense. For Foucault, such mastery reflects three distinct, anti-Platonic, genealogical uses: *The first is parodic, directed against reality and opposes the theme of history as reminiscence or recognition; the second is dissociative, directed against identity, and opposes history given as continuity or representative of a tradition; the third is sacrificial, directed against truth, and opposes history as knowledge* (p. 160). A total fiction is not a fiction of totalities, just as Foucault's genealogical analysis of history is not a total history. Both are marked by a questioning of categories: reality and distorted recollection, stable structures and discontinuity, truth and error. The three uses together imply, as Foucault notes, a severance of history's connection to memory, and [the construction of] a counter-memory — a

*transformation of history into a totally different form of time* (p. 160). This other time is at the crux of *Historia de Mayta*.

It is perhaps reading Mayta against the grain of the author's intention to insist upon the parodic element in this novel. After all, Vargas Llosa has stated apparently non-ironically, that the novel is precisely concerned with *the role of fiction in real life — in individual life, in social life, in historical life. And the kind of symmetry between fiction in literature and fiction in politics* (qtd. Coover p. 28). The earnest appeal to *the role of fiction in real life* recalls the strictures of critics like Lukács; powerful inducements for a total novelist, but finally unsatisfying for one with modern sensibilities. Vargas Llosa is not one of Lukács favored nineteenth-century realists, nor is he a neo-realist, or a hyper-realist, or a surrealist, though all of these elements combine in a tightly woven net much stronger than the sum of its holes. His works, as Luis Harss shrewdly writes, *within their more or less tortuous "realism" are much better than they ought to be* (pp. 102-103). There is symmetry, Vargas Llosa notes, between literary and political fictions, a suspension of disbelief in the face of a systematic set of ideas. Since both are fundamentally *fictions*, neither can capture or organize reality in a logical, scientific fashion.<sup>2</sup> Logically, then, this *historia/novela*, this *real life* (English translation of title) reveals an attempt to use history parodically, as a weapon against itself, against reality, against recognition.

Accordingly, Vargas Llosa's vision in the opening pages of the novel is less realistic than surrealist; the city is threatened by an engulfing sea of garbage, creeping up the slopes of the escarpment until it laps at the doors of the suburban houses perching above. No great loss, that. For the houses themselves are garbage: ugly, *imitaciones de imitaciones*, sad parodies of middle-class dwellings in more fortunate parts of the globe, *a las que el miedo asfixia de rejas, muros, sirenas y reflectores*. The narrator's ironic vision extends further: *Las antenas de la televisión forman un bosque espectral* (p. 7). Antennas and garbage: a sad parody of pastoral meadows and trees.

In this decaying anti-pastoral city, the narrator of the novel conducts his search for Mayta, an impassioned parodic quest into *la historia con mayúsculas* (p. 77), which he seeks only in order to betray more fully in his invented *historias*. The narrator, an anti-detective, does not wish to piece together the facts of a forgotten crime, but to pervert the piecemeal evidence for his own political/artistic purposes. He wants to tell the story of Mayta — or better, a story in which a character named Mayta is the

ostensible subject and, appearances to the contrary, he has no interest in nor patience with the true detective's task, the storing and sifting of information, just as he has no feeling for the biographer's concern with accurate, verifiable historical records. Thus envisioned, the project seems doomed to a tired postmodern triteness. Through another ironic twist, in the course of his parodic quest the writer as biographer/detective becomes the subject of a subtle parody as well, and through shrewd manipulation of the levels of narrative, the implied author avoids the trap into which his narrator carelessly stumbles. In his review of the novel, Michael Wood points to the fact that the narrator *keeps stumbling into terrible banalities and offering them as discoveries* (p. 35). Wood, however, makes the mistake of too closely identifying the novel's narrator with its author, and thus he misses a crucial distinction.

All of the reviewers of the novel have pointed to the author's dazzling mastery of his technique, the tight interweaving of the narrator's quest and the novelistic re-creation of Mayta's life. The narrator negotiates this smooth interpenetration of temporal and historical modes by impeccable transitions from past to present, shifts which may be accompanied by a slight shock on the reader's part, but which are never confusing even when the narrator slips into the use of "yo" rather than "él" for Mayta. The identification between writer and character, so natural under such circumstances that the reader easily compensates for it, is, at the same time necessary, precise, and rigorously upheld throughout the novel. If as Wood says, and I agree, the narrator has a tendency to present banalities as discoveries, Mayta, tellingly, shares the same tendency. The narrator has, unwittingly perhaps, invested too much of himself in the creation of the character Mayta. Both central characters in Vargas Llosa's novel — the narrator and Mayta — represent a similar type, the modern anti-hero, or hero *manqué*. Mayta's revolution is a preordained failure, a melodrama or near farce: not a tragedy but a bungled kermes. The narrator's ambitious novel remains unwritten. Philosophical motivation and drive are allowed them, but they lack the demonic intensity of either the true revolutionary or the great novelist. Quite simply, a *real life* is not sufficient to give life to the narrator's dreams. In the "Journal" to his novel about another failed novelist, *The Counterfeiters*, André Gide cites the pertinent observation of the French poet and critic Albert Thibaudet:

It is rare for an author who depicts himself in a novel to make of himself a convincing figure... The authentic novelist creates his characters according to the infinite directions of his possible life: the false novelist creates them from the single line of his real life. The genius of the novel makes the possible come to life: it does not revive the real (p. 451).

In a parodic post-Gidean *real life* or *historia/novela* we do not need a Thibaudet to spell out the implications. It is not that reality is banal and finite while fiction is brilliant and infinite, but that both fiction and reality can be shabbily banal when handled by a false novelist and brilliantly suggestive in the hands of a true one. Vargas Llosa, like Gide, has given us a novelist of each sort in his masterful parodic text.

From the stylistic ploy utilized in the opening of the novel, with its careful baroque depiction of the grotesque city, the reader should be forewarned that the work to follow will be less *historia* and less novel than romance, less a re-creation of the past than *making the possible come to life*, and less representational and more *fabular* (Scholes' term) than traditional realistic fiction.<sup>3</sup> The appeal of this text lies partially in the holes in the net, in the interstices of an intricately intertextualized performance where free use of the author's creativity to shape reality is turned to good use where parodic distortion heightens rather than detracts from fidelity. The depressingly parodic houses about to be swallowed up by garbage take on an almost emblematic cast.

The issue is central to the body of the novel, where the game of conflicting levels of (un)reality is stylishly played out. The unreliable and almost certainly corrupt senator points to one aspect in his interview with the narrator. *Tarde o temprano*, he says, *la historia tendrá que escribirse.... La verdadera, no el mito. Aunque no es el momento todavía* (p. 93). Time is not yet ripe for true history; thus, the (false) romance the narrator projects is politically as well as aesthetically acceptable. If he were to take any other course, the senator warns, he would be faced with a lawsuit for libel. The narrator does not reveal at any point whether or not he takes the senator at his word. At times he seems to be playing the senator's game all too closely, but at other moments the reader may feel that the narrator is ignoring the warnings of political expediency and writing a true history thinly disguised as myth, and at such times the net of parody seems to be cast farther, and deeper.

More concretely, the novel proper fosters a parallel set of realities: present lived experience — the narrator jogs, travels, interviews, listens to news reports, etc. — and past reconstructed experience — the re-creation of Mayta and Vallejo's aborted rebellion. The two lines of the double story alternate more and more frequently as the novel approaches its dual climax: the jailbreak in Jauja, the invasion of Lima. At one point as the climax nears, in a single magisterial passage the reader finds (1) two different periods of Mayta's life, (2) excerpts from the narrator's interviews with Mayta's wife, (3) a description of the contemporary bombing of Cusco, and (4) an example of "yo/él" vacillation on the part of the narrator (pp. 212-13). The intermeshing of the various levels and times is technically astounding, and the very brilliance of the fictional

technique signals the use of a daring novelistic ploy; we are in a fictive universe, as the narrator so often and so pedantically states, and not in a re-creation of a life, real or fantastic, in the past or in the present. The advancing revolution in the present of the novel, the interview, the narrator, the past of Mayta, Mayta himself, all are equally fictive elements of a single parodic vision, *directed against reality, and oppose[d] the theme of history as reminiscence or recognition* (Foucault, p. 160).

One of the functions — one of the uses — of these narrative shifts is to effect smoothly and efficiently these parallel shifts in the sense of history defined by the novel. The relation of literature and reality, perhaps the oldest of all critical concerns, is given a distinct anti-Platonic value. The narrator, speaking of the (admittedly) fictive revolution in present-day Peru, muses on just this issue:

la información, en el país, ha dejado de ser algo objetivo [But was it ever objective?] y se ha vuelto fantasía, tanto en los diarios, la radio y la televisión como en la boca de las personas. "Informar" es ahora, entre nosotros, interpretar la realidad [or the series of illusions that pass for reality] de acuerdo con los deseos.... [He concludes:] Por el camino más inesperado, la vida del Perú ... se ha vuelto literaria (p. 274).

Information, fantasy, desire, literature: the narrator traces the course of his own tale and the reader of the parodic text ticks off the stages.

**Information:** The writer is necessarily in a tenuous (attenuated) position in respect to the issue of truth and/versus life, of an admitted fiction that purports to reflect a history, of the impossibility of factual verification for any of the evidence presented.

**Fantasy:** Reality includes unreality: this issue is already banal. How can it not be in a country of illiterates where *a menos de trescientos kilómetros de Lima... se convierte en gringo, en marciánò* (p. 143).

**Desire:** Desire contaminates the mechanism of historical reconstruction and poses further complications for the fictional representation of (pseudo)historical events. Conflicting desires remain unsatisfied.

— Eso es una novela— dice Juanita.... — Esa no parece historia real, en todo caso.

— No va a ser historia real, sino, efectivamente, una novela — le confirmo —....

— Entonces, para qué tantos trabajos — insinúa ella, con ironía..

— Porque soy realista.... (p. 77).

**Literature:** In exposing the disparity between reality and the realistic artifact, the narrator causes the decomposition not only of history or the history within the text, but also of the narrating self whose life, like that of the titular protagonist, dissolves in the willfully fictive effort of giving it form (see Coover p. 29). The novel's parodic thrust is self-cancelling: the book becomes a postmodernistic self-consuming artifact: *The cover story is based on a historical rebellion in the mountains of Peru in the late 1950's, led by a romantic Trotskyite actually named, it would seem, Alejandro Mayta* (Coover, p. 28). *The story is simple. In 1958... a lonely (and I take it, imaginary) Peruvian Trotskyite joins forces with an ardent army lieutenant to start the revolution in the high Andes...* (Woods, p. 34). "It would seem," subordinated by commas; "I take it," buried in parentheses: evidence of the reviewers' discomfort with the dissolving frontiers of fact and fiction, of a fractious, factitious reality, and of the potential ambiguities of a parodic history that fascinates, tantalizes, but leaves the reader desirous of more... information.

## II

The parodic use of history intimates a narrowing relationship with the carnivalesque, and indeed, the encroaching revolution with its gringos and Cubans permits a near carnival (or reverse carnival) to erupt in the panic-stricken cities under bombardment. The second use of history extends the implications of a parodic, carnivalesque bombardment of reality to the myth of a continuous identity or tradition: the destruction of the self and its place, the place in which it lives, the place from which it writes.

First, the self: *the body, says Foucault, is the inscribed surface of events..., the locus of a dissociated Self..., and a volume in perpetual disintegration.... [Genealogy's] task is to expose a body totally imprinted by history and the process of history's destruction of the body* (p. 148). In the fifth chapter of *Historia de Mayta* (there are ten chapters in the novel), the narrator travels to a Jauja presently living under a state of siege as the revolutionaries and the Peruvian army both sporadically conduct raids on the townsfolk, vying for control of the area. There, he meets and interviews Professor Chato Ubilluz, a professional historian and self-styled sage of Mayta's aborted uprising. *Las verdaderas lecciones de filosofía y de historia, las que no podía dar en el San José, las di en este cuartito*, he tells the novelist proudly. *Mi casa fue una universidad del pueblo* (p. 139). Pride, a historian's pride and a personal longing for revindiction, is all that remains. Even his library — *la biblioteca marxista más completa de Jauja* (p. 136) — has been destroyed, leaving only the evidence of empty shelves and the stated suspicion of both the government

and the rebels. He insists, nevertheless, on his unimpeachable integrity, and assures the novelist that *aunque mi cuerpo esté maltratado por los años, mi memoria no lo está* (p. 155). Ubilluz' studied air of innocence leaves the narrator unconvinced:

— Usted habrá oído muchos cuentos sobre la historia de Vallejos, por supuesto. Y los seguirá oyendo estos días.

— Como sobre todas las historias — le replico —. Algo que se aprende tratando de reconstruir un suceso a base de testimonios, es, justamente, que todas las historias son cuentos; que están hechas de verdades y mentiras (p. 134).

The appearance of yet another in the narrator's series of resounding banalities alerts the reader to the conflict between these two characters who play a historical reconstruction. Ubilluz hints that only *his* memories have validity, while at the same time planting the doubt of his veracity in his interviewer's mind. The narrator, in response, pompously perorates on the admixture of truth and lies that form the basis of all history. The exchange reveals the inevitable conflict between an admitted liar, who hints that his lies will produce a greater truth, and the unconfessed liar who wants his tales to be accepted as fact. Identity hinges on the ability to maintain and justify a traditional role, historian or novelist, and if Mayta reflects one aspect of the narrator, his unredeemable mediocrity, Ubilluz represents another, an aspect of the narrator's identity which is self-cancelling in its excessive desire for self-justification.

Unsurprisingly, the narrator condemns the theoretician and historian Ubilluz more strongly than any other character in the novel, and condemns him precisely for that which he refuses to recognize in himself: the overwhelming drive to justify his own role in history. Ubilluz' memory the narrator hints maliciously, may be too good to allow the old man to lie with impunity. The narrator watches with evident satisfaction as the final part of Ubilluz' narration *lo pone incómodo*; avoiding direct response to the interviewer's probes, the old Marxist counters with direct accusation: *¿Tiene sentido escribir una novela estando el Perú como está...?* (p. 158). This indignant question points up the symmetry between literary and political fictions, the very symmetry Vargas Llosa says is at the heart of the work. The narrator, typically, brushes aside the question, but he is clearly discomfited by the forced recall of the tradition in which he writes a historical and literary tradition, a tradition of *soporíferas mediocridades*.

El profesor de Literatura Española parecía convencido de que era más importante leer lo que el señor Leo Spitzer había escrito sobre Lorca que los poemas de Lorca... y al profesor de Historia [ironically, here at last is /

*historia con mayúsculas*] parecía importarle más las fuentes de la historia del Perú que la historia del Perú... (p. 57).

Garbage in, garbage out. The novel, as we recall, begins and ends with a hallucinatory vision of garbage — human garbage like *esos cholitos descalzos, a quienes veo tirar de una carreta de botellas vacías* (p. 119) as well as by-products of human existence — invading the suburbs of Lima. The image is not fortuitous, and the *leit motiv* of the invading garbage permeates the entire novel. Progressive deterioration has no limits: *en el campo de las controversias políticas este país fue un gran basural antes de ser el cementerio que es ahora* (p. 159). *Los novelistas*, says Vargas Llosa in an interview, *son como los buitres* (Cano Gaviria, p. 71).

The narrator achieves a kind of catharsis in picking through this trash heap his evocation of a discredited tradition. All his fantasies and desires are swept up in the telling of a melodramatic revolutionary tale so stereotyped in characterization that motivations for behavior are only tenuously and unconvincingly attached to the protagonists: the improbable and weakly motivated homosexuality of Mayta, his unlikely friendship with Vallejos, their unexpected and problematic betrayal by Ubilluz. What is clear is the narrator's nostalgic compulsion to retell the tale of a revolutionary Golden Age. The present is the time of invading garbage; then, revolution was more civilized: *Los revolucionarios usaban corbata entonces* (p. 19). *Los policías no consideraban todavía que cualquier hombre con poncho y ojotas era... un cómplice de los subversivos* (p. 285), the antagonists *en ese tiempo se tomaban prisioneros* (p. 293). Those times, another time, discontinuous with the present.

Still, the implied author behind the character-narrator is astonishingly efficient in welding together the unwieldy mass of proliferating discontinuities, disintegrating characters, and an unreliable narrator into a single work, be it *historia* or romance. Writing from no-place, no-time, the implied author creates a space where (re)writing can occur, a place which is mythic in resonance and rigorously theoretical in the sense Michel de Certeau gives the word in his discussion of the *three characteristics which are to be found whenever reason transforms into a myth the real on which belief depends*. He describes these characteristics as operations of substitution: *for the believable is substituted the readable/visible; for the historical, the speculative; and for the non-coherence of different wishes (or beings), the coherence of principles by which a thought gives itself, as in a mirror, its own project* (p. 56). The dissociative use of history provides a spurious mask of identity that the implied author uses to play in two places at once: the illusory theater of the writing subject and the non-representative drama of a discredited tradition. We recall that the novel is recognized by all accounts as a *dazzling performance*, perhaps even a

*shade too much of a performance* (Updike, p. 98): on the surface, very readable, overtly speculative, just a shade too coherent for unqualified approval; on another level, the parodic tale of the writing of the text.

Setting, in such an uneasy, discontinuous drama, is a consciously deployed image as well as a novelistic exigency. The various carefully described settings of the interviews offer the apprehensive reader a relief from temporal suspension, and provide an index of coherence, a basis for speculation, a readable text. Time may be ruthlessly fragmented, but a holistic surface reality is vigorously maintained. It is easy to forget, and important to remember, that such settings are superficial; the narrator is a jogger through the garbage, a vulture in the cemeteries.

These settings are typically conveyed by means of a stylized interior monologue clearly directed towards the reader. Vargas Llosa has long been noted for his love of symmetry (Cf. Gerdes, p. 150), but in this novel formal symmetry verges on formula. Two examples suffice to establish the pattern, each drawn from the opening descriptions of the central cities in the novel: the first describes Lima, the second, Jauja (all emphasis mine):

Correr en las mañanas por el Malecón de Barranco, cuando la humedad de la noche todavía impregna el aire y tiene a las veredas resbaladizas y brillosas, es una *buena manera* de comenzar el día. *El cielo está gris, aun en el verano, pues el sol jamás aparece* sobre el barrio *antes de las diez* y la neblina imprecisa la frontera de las cosas, el perfil de las gaviotas, *el alcastraz que cruza volando* la quebradiza línea del acantilado... Es un *paisaje bello*, a condición de centrar la mirada en los elementos y en los pájaros. Porque *lo que ha hecho el hombre, en cambio, es feo* (p.7).

*Para tomar* el tren a Jauja hay que comprar el boleto la víspera y presentarse en la estación de Desamparados *a las seis de la mañana*. Me han dicho que el tren va siempre lleno y, en efecto, *debo tomar el vagón por asalto...* Pero, *con todas sus incomodidades* y lentitud, el viaje está *lleno de sorpresas*, la primera de las cuales son *estos vagones trepando* desde el nivel del mar hasta los cinco mil metros para cruzar los Andes en el Paso de Anticona, al pie del Monte Meiggs. *Ante el soberbio espectáculo, me olvido de los soldados con fusiles* apostados en cada vagón y de la ametralladora que hay en el techo de la locomotora, en previsión de ataques (pp. 127-28).

The symmetry in these opening descriptions of the two cities is striking. Each begins with a verb in the infinitive — *correr, para tomar* — the form of the verb reducing motion to comparative stasis, to a silent, impersonal suspension in space and time. The subsequent use of a specific marker of time — *antes de las diez, a las seis* — does not disrupt this initially established general sense of a timeless scene, or at least, of an

eternally repeated sequence. Furthermore this stasis evoked by the initial verb is confirmed and sustained by the generalized description that follows: the sky is always grey, the inconveniences of the train never vary.

These vaguely negative images provoke a twinge of uneasiness with the pastoral landscape, a stir of apprehension that contrasts with the narrator's first (and positive) judgmental statement: Running *es una buena manera de comenzar el día* despite a depressingly sunless sky, and despite the manifold discomforts, *el viaje está lleno de sorpresas*. In each description, too, the slightly disturbing negative images of the wider vista are paired with a second set of more positive images, focussing on a specific point, which suggest a soaring, upward motion — *el alcatraz que cruza volando, estos vagones trepando* — that parallel the narrator's transition from the ambiguous *lleno de sorpresas* or merely trite *buena manera* to the more soaringly complimentary final judgments. *Es un paisaje bello*, the narrator comments approvingly; *un soberbio espectáculo*, he raves. Then, unexpectedly, the narrator's line of vision shifts from the distant heights — the sky and the birds, the mountains and the climbing train — to the nearer scene where the works of man are revealed in all their unremitting ugliness.

Thus, the opening paragraphs of these two crucial descriptions follow a similar trajectory. In each, the locale is specified with great precision though a sense of timelessness hangs over the scene. In each, the stasis is balanced by an opening into a vision of beauty snatched from a movement to the heights. In each, the recall of the constrictions of the present closes the temporary aperture.

All this is perhaps too obvious. It is significant, though, that the microstructure just adduced is applicable to the general structure of each of the chapters and to the novel as a whole; Vargas Llosa's famous love of symmetry is much in evidence. Each chapter begins with the description of the setting followed by the introduction of the interviewee(s). The aperture is provided by the winging of the narrator's imagination into the past and by his parallel narrative climb towards the achingly beautiful austerity of the high Andes and the events in Jauja, an aperture balanced and offset by occasional recall of the novelistic present. At the end of each chapter, as at the end of the novel, the narrator returns definitively to the entrapment in the present time he has temporarily escaped by recourse to fictional reconstruction. At each level, it is important to note, the structure remains a superficial one; the jogger moves on with scarcely a backward glance.

## III

The third use of history, *directed*, as Foucault says, *against truth* (p. 160), ushers in a Dionysiac *sacrifice of the subject of knowledge* (p. 162). The jogger is himself, thus, a parodic or degraded figure of Dionysius or of one of his priests, who wanders from place to place without a fixed center. This nomadic life inevitably incites conflict with those who have taken up more permanent residences. For if theirs is the settled realm of knowledge and truth, the jogger or wanderer-poet is the purveyor of error and uncertainty. Says Blanchot:

Error is the risk which awaits the poet.... Error means wandering, the inability to abide and stay. For where the wanderer is, the conditions of a definitive here are lacking.... Consequently, what happens does not happen, but does not pass either, into the past; it is never passed.... The wanderer's country is not truth, but exile... (p. 238).

Foucault's sacrifice of knowledge is similar, but still more radical. To Blanchot's formulation he would seem to add that truth itself *is undoubtedly the sort of error that cannot be refuted* (p. 144); a statement with which Vargas Llosa, through the characterization of the ironic jogger-poet in this novel, would seem to concur.

The central paradox of the text involves a careful and repeated juxtaposition of the categories of lies and truth (of irrefutable error) and a sacrifice of historical knowledge in the service of the wanderer's aesthetic sense. Not only in the often-repeated formulation that the purpose of these investigations is *para mentir sabiendo sobre qué mentía* (p. 320), but in all his unvoiced reflections on his theme, the narrator constantly juggles his own doubts with the truth and lies he manipulates: *No sé cómo seguir.... [S]olamente sé que la historia de Mayta es la que quiero conocer e inventar, con la mayor vitalidad posible.... La verdad, no sé por qué la historia de Mayta me intriga y me perturba* (my emphases, p. 53). Knowledge and ignorance, inventions and truth intermingle constantly.

The wanderer through Vargas Llosa's text confronts a veritable minefield of lies in which the two senses of *historia* remain inseparable. The wandering poet leads an erratic course through this dangerous area. Errors may be structural, as when the narrator identifies the episode at Jauja as *el fin del episodio central de aquella historia, su nudo dramático* (p. 306). The complacent reader might be inclined to accept the narrator's analysis at face value, but on a closer examination one readily perceives the trap. Jauja may be the *nudo dramático* to *aquella historia*, but *that* story and *this* one are obviously quite different. Other lies may reflect on

specific matters of content. Even details of setting — nocturnal birds, the wind, the starry sky — are subject to distortion. Like the people of this unhappy country, *mienten, igual que una ficción* (p. 307). The reader's sense of unease with the ambiguously beautiful landscapes that preface each chapter is fully justified in view of this pervasive untruth.

The warnings of narrative error alert the reader to other potential mines. Early in the novel, the narrator prominently suggests that he knew Mayta only prior to the Trotskyite's involvement in the aborted revolution. *La última vez que lo vi [fue] semanas antes de la fiesta en que conoció a Vallejos*, he assures us (p. 29). Even in such details, especially in such details, the narrator's veracity is always in doubt. Three hundred pages later he ends the novel by interviewing his protagonist in the strangely anti-climactic *nudo dramático* to the series of interviews.

The text is also riddled with stylistic errors, all directly attributable to the narrator. I have already commented upon his use of self-consciously scandalous, cleverly pretentious platitudes to define his project; fortunately, the success of the narrative does not depend on such superficial analyses of motive. At other points, the text shudders forward with the assistance of parodically inept transitions that the narrator seems to intend as sly anticipatory remarks: *Este muchacho dará que hablar, decía el Padre Giovanni. Sí, dio que hablar, pero no en el sentido que usted creía, Padre* (p. 16). In allowing such statements to stand, the implied author takes the risk of error, sacrificing even the privileged role of the editor behind the scenes.

The most common use of lie, however, occurs in the narrator's dealings with the *witnesses* he interviews for information on Mayta that he can traduce in the still-to-be-written novel. John Updike praises the recreation of past scenes in Mayta's life, noting that they are *all wonderfully done, though we are disconcertingly reminded that it might have been done quite otherwise, that art is as arbitrary as truth is relative* (p. 101). The tentative novelistic reconstructions are based on the information provided by the witnesses — truth, lies, whatever — and adapted further for dramatic effectiveness. The recognition that myth or fictive speculation is more powerful, perhaps ultimately more valid and true than historical documentation, would seem to be a significant factor in the text; yet there too small inconsistencies abound as warnings to the wary traveller of mines ahead. An early reconstruction has Mayta teaching Marxist doctrine to Vallejos; on Ubilluz' insistence that he rather than Mayta was the source of Vallejos' Marxism, the narrator obligingly begins a new reconstruction with *Era verdad*, and in this version gives Mayta a somewhat less prominent role (p. 136). In reaction to the *chismes y murmuraciones* against Ubilluz, however, the narrator indicates his *desconfianza* (p. 159)

with the professor's tale, and Mayta's role is restored, Ubilluz' diminished, in the succeeding pages.

The disconcerting effects of arbitrariness extend much farther; the interviews themselves are wonderfully done scenes and, in the context of the novel, equally untrustworthy as faithful records of conversations between the narrator and the witnesses. Each of the interviews, except the last, with Mayta himself, takes place in the context of a fictional escalation of the violence in Peru into a full-fledged Civil War, and the progress of that Civil War underlying the main story offers another handy reminder of the powers of fiction. There too, in the interviews as in the reconstructions of the past, internal inconsistencies signal the errors of fictional history. One prominent example is the interview with Mayta's ex-wife Adelaida, who agrees to see the narrator only on condition of remaining anonymous, receiving payment for her time, and keeping quiet about information she considers *demasiado privad[a]* (p. 203). Adelaida's tale, as the narrator reconstructs it, is a combination of elements that any woman of Adelaida's ilk would certainly consider too private to tell: her disgraceful and unfulfilling marriage to Mayta, her discovery of his homosexuality in the most shocking manner possible, her decision to marry another man while pregnant to give the child a better home than her present husband can supply, her long-standing separation from both husbands and from her son. If such inconsistencies were not enough to remind the reader of the blatant fabrication occurring, the narrator's off-hand revelation that Mayta's homosexuality was a complete fabrication sends the reader reeling back through the minefield once again. Adelaida's motivation dissolves, Ubilluz' testimony is made yet more unreliable, senator Campos' untrustworthy *truths* revealed only to the novelist (p. 114) disappear entirely.

The issue of Mayta's sexuality is indeed the most significant characterological perversion and most obvious parodic sacrifice of both truth and knowledge to the vagrant jogger's taste for error. For Wood, the narrator's hedging glibness about homosexuality exacerbates rather than resolves the issue and reflects unfavorably on authorial prejudice (pp. 35-36). One response to the problem is that the sexual aura in one form or another is *de rigueur* in all Vargas Llosa's works; he has noted that

una novela ha sido más seductora para mí en la medida en que en ella aparecían, combinadas con pericia en una historia compacta, la rebeldía, la violencia, el melodrama, y el sexo. En otras palabras, la máxima satisfacción que puede producirme una novela es provocar, a lo largo de la lectura, mi admiración por alguna inconfirmitad, mi cólera por alguna estupidez o injusticia, mi fascinación por esas escenas de distorsionado romanticismo..., y mi deseo (*Orgía*, p. 20).



A plot involving a rebellion stemming from the protagonist's (or the narrator's) sense of a sexual or emotional deficiency neatly combines all the prerequisite elements. The parodic nature of the text turns the narrative exigency back upon itself.

To the degree that he is manipulated by the formal restrictions of the plot, Mayta is not a complex character *per se*, and the narrative technique with its deep parodic thrust prevents him from ever gaining in either profundity or urgency from the situation in which he is cast. Mayta's life is, not unexpectedly, suspended between self-expression and self-destruction, both of which tend only to confirm the strictness of the character's ties with the narrator. In Lima, says the narrator, *[uno] tiene que habituarse a la miseria y a la mugre o volverse loco o suicidarse*. He continues ominously, *Pero estoy seguro que Mayta nunca se habituó* (p. 8). Mayta obligingly conforms to the implications of the narrator's conclusions. *Es un suicidario*, says one witness (p. 29); *había en él una tendencia autodestructiva*, reports another (p. 39). The narrator projects Mayta's thoughts: *había creído volverse loco, pensando en matarse* (p. 58).

For the wanderer in the country of error, the Latin American homosexual male provides a total symbol for the alienated exile, an outsider whatever his milieu. Knowledgeable or innocent, the homosexual lifts the forgotten revolution out of pettiness, allowing the novelist to exploit the theme, to make it more politically charged, more provocatively nonconformist in both content and form, more seductive. Political conviction and erotic obsession, as Vargas Llosa has suggested, frequently go hand in hand (Cano Gaviria, pp. 70-71). Yet, once again, at this point the narrator comes into conflict with the implied author, and permits the sacrifice of truth, of knowledge, and of tragedy. For if the narrator, in his somewhat grandiose but inchoate musings, envisions himself another Proust or Genet, the implied author allows us to see clearly how Mayta falls short of those monstrously powerful exploitations of the homosexual theme. A jogger is not a demonic wanderer-poet; petty lies and stylistic errors do not involve aesthetic risk, but the implied author uses an impeccable historical sense to fashion these unpromising products of a second-rate mind into a first-rate book.

#### IV

In consonance with the central conceit of the *historia/novela* that the novel represents the history of the writing of the novel, the issue of *writing* itself is given central force. It is precisely this issue that Roland Barthes addresses in his seminal essay "To Write: An Intransitive Verb?"

In the essay, Barthes discusses a series of grammatical oppositions involving time (past versus non-past), voice (active versus passive), and person as well as the central opposition between transitivity and non-transitivity. For the alert reader, he discovers, *to write* permits a manifold of meanings surpassing these simple binaries: *to write* (active voice) suggests an action carried out without reference to the self, possibly in someone else's behalf; *to write* (passive voice) may be seen, in J. M. Coetzee's words, *as a linguistic metaphor for a particular kind of writing, writing in stereotyped forms and genres* (p. 13); but *to write* can also encompass a third voice neither active nor passive in which *to write is to make oneself the center of action of la parole; it is to effect writing in being affected oneself; it is to leave the writer (le scripteur) inside the writing... as the agent of the action*. Writing today, Barthes concludes, has become the only field of operations for the writer (pp. 134-56 *passim*).

For Vargas Llosa, increasingly over recent years, the space of writing has become his field as well, and in all of his novels since *Conversación en la catedral*, the third voice is strongly present as the writer and his writing take central roles in unfolding narrative. Layers accumulate in the text as the reader observes the writer writing and the writer observing himself writing and reflecting on what has been written. Santiago Zavala in *Conversación* is a journalist, a mediocre one, who has intentionally chosen this mediocrity so as to avoid, by his resounding failure, the more banal mediocrity of conformity.<sup>4</sup> In *La tía Julia y el escribidor*, Vargas Llosa provides two models for the writer: a fledgling Varguitas who is already feeling his way into the third voice, and an old hack named Camacho whose popular melodramas clearly fit the model of passive writing described by Coetzee. The storyteller/writer figure is likewise prominent in *La guerra del fin del mundo*, where the reader encounters Galileo Gall, who writes for a French journal, a myopic journalist, whose musings on his work provide the closest approximation of the third voice in this novel, the Consejero's scribe León de Natuba, and *el Enano*, an illiterate storyteller.

Mayta, like Galileo Gall, works for the revolutionary press, and besides his collaboration in the *Voz Obrera* of his tiny Trotskyite cell, he translates from the French for France Presse. *Yo nunca supe que fuera escritor ni nada que se le pareciera*, says Mayta's aunt. But it seems that nothing is simpler or more obvious. *Sí, escribía*, says the narrator, *y alguna vez yo leí los artículos que aparecían en esos periodiquitos*. To write, however, is a verb of many meanings. Mayta wrote, but his writings only reveal the bankruptcy of a certain strident revolutionary style: *Doña Josefa tenía razón: no era un escritor ni nada que se le pareciera* (p. 27). Mayta, with

his flat feet and revolutionary passions, is a direct descendent of Galileo Gall and Santiago Zavala.

The narrator who so glibly dismisses Mayta's writings is, clearly, an older and not much wiser Varguitas, another myopic journalist who lacks the symbolic eyeglasses that would serve to keep his limitations in proper perspective. Yet, in a moment of desperation or clairvoyance he also realizes a fundamental truth: *no escribiré esta novela* (p. 91). The narrator is no longer a potential novelist, like Gide's Edouard, he is a failed writer, and the novel he wishes to produce exists only in the disseminated fragments strewn about this text.

*Historia de Mayta: novela* is quite a different matter. It is, in Vargas Llosa's famous formulation, *un asesinato simbólico de la realidad* (*Deicidio*, p. 85) in favor of another reality *creada por las palabras y sus intersticios* (Davis, p. 36). The uses of history coincide with the assassination of reality, highlighting the third meaning of writing, of a writing neither active nor passive, but possessing a distinct voice between or beyond traditional grammatical distinctions. Revolution, violence, melodrama and sex — and *un elemento añadido*:

Este *elemento añadido* hace que la obra de ficción no sólo testimonie sobre una realidad sino también sobre los desacuerdos, sobre el tipo de rebelión que esa realidad inspira al escritor. A la vez que expresa una realidad, la obra de ficción la corrige, la modifica, la sustituye por una nueva realidad, aunque de hecho esta suplantación no sea más que una quimera, que existe en el escritor como un deseo oscuro... (Cano Gaviria, p. 51).

If the writer's choice of form is affected by history — literary as well as political — the crucial added element is the author's obligation to write, *to effect writing in being affected oneself*, to accept the governance of the obscure desire to know oneself and reality, and to relinquish that knowledge when necessary, through writing, the intransitive third-voice verb.

## NOTES

1 Luis Harss points to the tendency in critics during the sixties to think of Vargas Llosa as a Tolstoyan *total novelist* (p. 103). Robert Brody finds that while the Peruvian novelist has not yet published a *total novel*, the *totalization impulse is strong in his works* (pp. 120-27). Similarly, Coover's review of *Mayta* concisely references Vargas Llosa's own reflections on this topic: *I don't know if it was Mr. Vargas Llosa himself who first coined the term total novel, but he used it early and often, attaching it in particular to Gabriel García Márquez' One Hundred Years of Solitude, about which he wrote an exhaustive work of total criticism* (García Márquez: *History of a Deicide*), to Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* which he described in *The Perpetual Orgy: Flaubert and Madame Bovary* as a kind of *exemplary precursor*, and to the great 15th-century chivalric novel, *Tirant Lo Blanc* by Joanot Martorell, whom he called "the earliest example of the all-powerful novelist, disinterested, omniscient and ubiquitous," the equal of Dickens, Flaubert, Tolstoy and Joyce. And attaching it as well, of course, to his own *totalizing ambitions* (p. 28).

2 Larry Rohter cites Vargas Llosa in a recent New York interview: *A good part of this violence... proceeds from a political fiction, from the idea that through a system and a body of ideas you can capture reality in its entirety and express it, organize it and reform it in a perfectly logical way. Every ideology leads ultimately to fanaticism, and fanaticism is fiction trying to impose itself on reality in the name of science* (*Times*, p. 28).

3 In his article on Vargas Llosa, "La transfiguración de la novela de caballería," Alexander Coleman deplors the fact that in Spanish *el único término crítico actualmente admitido para las formas narrativas largas es novela* and he suggests that the term *romance*, in contrast, *marca una diferenciación fundamental en el discurso crítico inglés y norteamericano*. The romance, he notes, tends more easily towards the antirepresentational aspects of fiction, towards myth and symbol (pp. 264-66).

4 Cano Gaviria also makes this point. See for example p. 100.

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## TESTIMONIO, MEMORIA Y PROFECIA EN CRONICA DEL DILUVIO DE ANTONIO NELLA CASTRO

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*El hombre sólo puede encontrar verdaderamente  
la profundidad de los tiempos en el fondo de sí  
mismo.*

Nicolai Berdiaev

*Yo he vivido, en una sola vida, todas las Edades...  
Noé (en Crónica del Diluvio).*

No es nueva la preocupación por las relaciones entre la historia y la literatura, pero hoy estos planteos — de una llamativa insistencia — se han renovado, sobre todo a la luz de las indagaciones narratológicas. La atención a la discursividad de la historiografía, por una parte, y la aceptación de la obra poética como vía cognoscitiva por otra, han investido de ingenuidad la oposición discurso histórico / discurso poético, en tanto enfrentamiento de verdad / falsedad, objetividad / subjetividad, racionalidad / imaginación. El camino emprendido para disolver tales dicotomías puede transitar hasta estaciones extremas: no han faltado pruebas de un discurso "ficticio" que se presenta como más "objetivo" que otro historiográfico sobre el mismo tema<sup>1</sup> o propuestas de una poética de la historiografía como la de Hayden White que entiende a esta última como