The Dictatorship Novels of Mario Vargas Llosa

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To Sandra and Raúl, without whom none of these pages would have been possible.

To Professor John A. Hall, for accepting to help me with this project when no one else would.

To Alonso Cueto, for showing me the way in the world of Mario Vargas Llosa.

Abstract

With a focus on *Conversation in The Cathedral* (1969) and *The Feast of the Goat* (2000), two dictatorship novels written by Peruvian novelist Mario Vargas Llosa in very different periods of his life and writing career, this thesis offers an exploration of two literary approaches to the phenomenon of absolute power that identifies sociologically stimulating elements and invites the reader to gauge the contributions of literature to society. While the 1969 novel recreates Peru under the regime of Manuel A. Odría from 1948 to 1956, the 2000 novel portrays the Dominican Republic during the dictatorship of Generalissimo Rafael Leonidas Trujillo (1930-1961). In both of these books, Vargas Llosa dissects the past of two Latin American societies which have been subject to totalitarian regimes, following a method that differs on many levels from that of a social scientist. And yet, in lying, these novels offer an invaluable source of guidance to navigate the tumultuous and puzzling legacy of a dictatorship. In this sense, the main objective of the essay is to investigate whether the dictatorship novels of Mario Vargas Llosa constitute legitimate evidence for the sociological study of totalitarian regimes. Based on textual analysis and the review of various secondary sources, we claim that the comparative analysis of these works of fiction, in light of Vargas Llosa's conception of literature, the relationship between the novel and politics, and the transfiguration of historical fact into fiction, exemplifies the way in which the partnership of the literary and the sociological imagination can lead to a much richer understanding of social experience.

Key words: dictatorship, novel, Vargas Llosa, sociology, Latin America

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INTRODUCTION

Ever since he published his first novel, *The Time of the Hero* (*La ciudad y los perros*, 1963), when he was 26 years old, Jorge Mario Pedro Vargas Llosa (Arequipa, Peru, 1936) has been recognised as one of the most salient literary figures of all times. In a writing career that spans over six decades, he has cultivated many genres and explored a wide array of topics across very different historical and geographical contexts. On the other hand, he has also provided ample evidence of being an acute observer and commentator of social reality in his articles and essay collections. The recipient of numerous accolades, including the Miguel de Cervantes Prize, the Prince of Asturias Award and multiple *Honoris Causa* doctorates from the most reputed universities in the world, Vargas Llosa won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2010 "for his cartography of structures of power and his trenchant images of the individual's resistance, revolt, and defeat."

The debut novel of the Peruvian author is regarded by many critics as the book that inaugurated the literary and commercial phenomenon known as the Latin American Boom, an unprecedented movement of Spanish American writers—together with Vargas Llosa, the more remarkable members were Gabriel García Márquez from Colombia, Carlos Fuentes from Mexico and Julio Cortázar from Argentina—whose novels quickly gained global prominence following their publication in Spain during the 1960s and 1970s. In response to the unstable political climate of Latin America during the sixties (particularly following the Cuban Revolution), this group of talented and visionary writers and intellectuals was highly politicized and took advantage of their worldwide notoriety to advocate for the societal transformations they deemed necessary to achieve social justice.

In early 1967, Carlos Fuentes wrote a letter to Vargas Llosa in which he persuaded him to prepare a volume of short stories about Latin American dictators. The collection would be titled "Los padres de las patrias" ("The Fathers of the Fatherlands") and the stories would be written by the most renowned writers from the region, such as Fuentes and Vargas Llosa themselves, Gabriel García Márquez (Colombia), Alejo Carpentier (Cuba) and Augusto Roa Bastos (Paraguay), "each paired with an historical dictator from their home country" (Armillas-Tiseyra 1). In consonance with the strong political vocation of Latin American writers at the time, the letter of Fuentes underscores the impact a collaborative work of this nature could have had for their societies:

> I was speaking last night with Jorge Edwards [another famous writer from Chile] and proposed to him the following: a volume that could be titled "The Patriarchs", "The Fathers of the Fatherlands," "The Redeemers," "The Benefactors," or something like that. The idea would be to write a crime report [*crónica negra*] for our America: a desecration of the desecrators […] It seems to me that emphasizing this sense of community, of a group project, will be immensely important for the future. (cited by Armillas-Tiseyra 11)

Although the initial project did not come to fruition, most of the authors who were involved wrote their own dictatorship novels and some of them in quick succession, as is the case with Carpentier's *Reasons of State* (1974), Roa Bastos's *I the Supreme* (1974) and García Márquez's *The Autumn of the Patriarch* (1975). The study of these works of fiction sheds light into key aspects such as the ways in which individuals cope with a repressive system, the formal demands of certain topics in literature, the correspondences between a writer's

ideology and their craft, the role of the writer in society, the extent to which fictional accounts of history can have an impact in readers' perception of the past, among others.

Vargas Llosa's political conversion from socialism to liberalism has been often associated with the treatment of politics in his fiction. According to Efraín Kristal, the beginning of Vargas Llosa's disenchantment with the Cuban Revolution can be traced back to 1967, when Alejo Carpentier asked him to donate the money from the Rómulo Gallegos Prize to Che Guevara in exchange for compensation from the Cuban government (174). But it was not until 1970, with the case of Heberto Padilla—a poet who had been recently freed from prison and accused the intellectuals who had defended him, the young Peruvian novelist among them, of being agents of the CIA—, that Vargas Llosa started to publish articles criticizing Castro's regime. Many years later, he found in the writings of Isaiah Berlin "a philosophical justification to abandon socialism" (236), as he explains in an article:

> Some years ago I lost the taste for political utopias, those apocalypses that promise to bring heaven to earth […] Reading Isaiah Berlin, I have seen with clarity something I had seen with confusion until then. True progress […] has always been achieved through a partial, heterodox, deformed application of social theories. (*Contra viento y marea II* 263; my translation)

Focusing on *Conversation in The Cathedral* (1969) and *The Feast of the Goat* (2000), two dictatorship novels written by Vargas Llosa in very different phases of his life and career, this essay offers an exploration of two literary approaches to the phenomenon of absolute power that identifies sociologically stimulating elements and invites the reader to gauge the contributions of literature to society. In *Conversation in The Cathedral*, the author recreates Peruvian society under the regime of Manuel A. Odría from 1948 to 1956, whereas *The Feast*

of the Goat portrays the Dominican Republic during the dictatorship of Generalissimo Rafael Leonidas Trujillo (1930-1961). In both of these works of fiction, Vargas Llosa dissects the past of two Latin American societies which have been subject to totalitarian regimes, following a method that differs on many levels from that of a social scientist. And yet, in lying, his novels offer an invaluable source of guidance to sift through the tumultuous and puzzling legacy of a dictatorship.

In this sense, the main objective of the thesis is to investigate whether the dictatorship novels of Mario Vargas Llosa constitute legitimate evidence for the sociological study of totalitarian regimes. It is our contention that the comparative analysis of these two political novels, in light of Vargas Llosa's conception of literature, the relationship between the novel and politics, and the transfiguration of historical fact into fiction, exemplifies the way in which the partnership of the literary and the sociological imagination can lead to a much richer understanding of social experience.

A fundamental source for the essay was John A. Hall's *The Sociology of Literature* (1979), a classic of the field whose content resonates with many of Vargas Llosa's ideas on literature and its relationship with the real world. According to Hall, sociology has much to gain from literature. In particular, he contends that literary texts are worth listening to because they "[make] sociology more sensitive to society in general and to the reaction of individuals to their society in particular," give the researcher access to "actual feelings," and thus provide information that has a remarkable "fullness of account" which can be gained nowhere else (38). Moreover, Hall recommends using the concept of 'social referent' rather than approaching works of fiction as if they were mere reflections of the social world (30) and defines literature as "an attempt made by men to understand their social experience" (32). By

implication, Vargas Llosa could be characterized, above all, as a writer who is committed with the problems of his time insofar as he constantly tries to make sense of what is going on in the world both in his fictional and non-fictional facet.

Another useful source was Efraín Subero's article "Para un análisis sociológico de la obra literaria" (1974), which provides a series of steps to analyze literary texts in light of their sociological content and the presumptive intentions of the implicit author. Apart from the textual analysis of the novels in question, we have reviewed a number of secondary sources (including criticism on Vargas Llosa's novels and his political convictions, interviews, speeches and essays he has written throughout the decades) that have allowed us to compare and contrast many interpretations. Among the critical approaches to the corpus of Vargas Llosa's works, those of José Miguel Oviedo, Sabine Köllmann and Efraín Kristal have been particularly helpful.

The paper is divided into two chapters which contain four sections each. The first chapter is dedicated to *Conversation in The Cathedral*. Section 1.1 ("A world as complex as reality") deals with Vargas Llosa's ambition to create a world that competes with the real one in his novels. Section 1.2. ("Frustration and defeat") focuses on the representation of Peruvian society under Odría's dictatorship as a closed world that lacks in alternatives. In Section 1.3 ("A cartography of power, evil and secrets"), the reader learns about the darkest and most impenetrable aspects of the regime. Section 1.4 ("A socialist novel?") addresses the link between Vargas Llosa's political convictions and his works of fiction. In the second chapter we discuss *The Feast of the Goat*, a dictatorship novel which was published three decades later than *Conversation*. Section 2.1 ("The 'total novel' revisited") analyses the return to the socio-political commitment palpable in Vargas Llosa's earlier narratives. Section 2.2 ("A

dictator that is everywhere") tackles the implications of Trujillo's omnipresence, in contrast to the absence of Odría in the 1969 novel. Section 2.3 ("On individual agency and the corruptive nature of power") revolves around the shared responsibility of citizens on the face of a dictatorship. Finally, section 2.4 ("The 'truth' about the Era de Trujillo") explains the way in which some of the myths surrounding the figure of the dictator are dismantled in Vargas Llosa's novel.

CHAPTER 1: AN AUTHOR'S EXPERIENCE OF A DICTATORSHIP

1.1. A world as complex as reality

In his prologue to the 2019 special edition for the 50th anniversary of *Conversation in The Cathedral* (*Conversación en La Catedral*, Seix Barral, 1969), Mario Vargas Llosa reminisces about the origins of the novel and the reception it has had over the decades:

> Odría's dictatorship was tragic for my generation. When it started, we were kids, and when it finished after eight years, we had already become men. In this novel I wanted to show the effects the dictatorship had on Peruvian society as a whole, from the popular classes to the elites […] The book initially had few readers, on account of its length and complexity. However, throughout these fifty years it has been gaining readers all around the world. This makes me very happy because it is the novel that has given me more work and the one I would save if I had to choose only one out of those I have written. (9; my translation)

Though less picturesque than other totalitarian regimes in the region, the eight-year military government of General Manuel Apolinario Odría (1948-1956), widely known as the 'ochenio' in Peru, left an indelible mark on those who endured it. On the one hand, a favourable economic situation allowed the regime to implement a vast array of populist measures that benefited the masses while maintaining the privileges of the oligarchy. Nonetheless, following the footsteps of other military tyrannies, all kinds of civil liberties were also constricted as soon as Odría rose to power. Political parties became illegal, the press was subject to a system of censorship that banned all forms of dissidence, there were thousands of political prisoners, and many members of the opposition had no option but to live in exile. The declared enemies of Odría, the Communist Party and, above all, the

American Popular Revolutionary Alliance (APRA), were severely repressed during the eight years of his government. Late historian Alfonso W. Quiroz argued that Odría's dictatorship opened a new chapter in the history of corruption in the public sector, giving unprecedented power to the armed forces (353). Coincidentally, Odría became president by leading a *coup d'état* against the government of José Luis Bustamente y Rivero (1894-1989), a sympathizer of the APRA who happened to be a relative of Vargas Llosa's maternal family.

In the same line of his two previous novels—*The Time of the Hero* (*La ciudad y los perros*, 1963) and *The Green House* (*La casa verde*, 1966)—, Vargas Llosa elaborated on his experiences as a young man living under the dictatorship of Odría in order to create a fictional world that draws attention to the tensions, contradictions and injustices of Peruvian society. While it is possible to dispense with it in a purely literary analysis of the text, the strong autobiographical element that impregnates the pages of Vargas Llosa's third novel should not be neglected. As we will come to see in the next section, Santiago Zavala's story—which constitutes the focal point of the plot—is not only evocative of the author's experiences during the dictatorship, but it also informs the way in which the reader approaches the stories of the multiple secondary characters (there are around 70 of them) who populate the narrative. For instance, the dog pound scene in the opening chapter that gives rise to the encounter between the two main protagonists is based on a true event:

> I had to go to a dog pound to rescue of dog of mine that had been caught on the street by the municipal police because they thought it was a vagabond dog. There I saw how the animals were executed: they put them inside bags and two strong men beat them with sticks. From that time, I imagined a story that would have a fighter as its protagonist, a man who after a glorious past as a professional bodyguard ends his days

> ruined and skeptical, killing dogs with a club for a few cents. (cited in Oviedo 186; my translation)

And yet again, it is Vargas Llosa's formal treatment of real-life anecdotes and historical sources that leads to a plausible and independent artistic invention.

As the author points out in his prologue, the fact that *Conversation in The Cathedral* was not as (commercially) successful as his other novels—the opposite is true of *The Feast of the Goat* (*La fiesta del Chivo*, 2000), which immediately became a publishing phenomenon—can be attributed to the complexity of its form. If Vargas Llosa was determined to denounce the deep state of corruption that had become the norm in the Peru of Odría, why did he make such a convoluted choice of structure and style that poses many challenges to the understanding of the average reader? The answer may be found in Balzac's quote from *Petites misères de la vie conjugale* (1830) that serves as the epigraph of the novel: "Il faut avoir fouillé toute la vie sociale pour être un vrai romancier, vu que le roman est l'histoire privée des nations." According to this definition—which Vargas Llosa has adhered to from the very beginning of his writing career—, the novel tells that which history fails to tell: the subjective, intimate, private, secret dimension that is a fundamental part of the experience of an epoch, of a society, of a world. Through the novel, then, we gain access to an area of human experience that historians (i.e. social scientists) cannot reach because there is no objective documentation about it. By contrast, novelists ("true" novelists at any rate) use their imagination in order to fill in the gaps of historical inquiry:

> The recomposition of the past that literature operates is almost always fallacious if one judges it in terms of historical objectivity. The *literary truth* [what Vargas Llosa calls 'the truth of lies'] is very different from the historical truth. And yet, even though it is

> full of lies—or perhaps precisely because of that—literature tells the story that historians neither know nor can tell. (Vargas Llosa *La verdad de las mentiras* 8; my translation)

Indeed, in keeping with this conception of literary testimony, the difficulty of the 1969 novel—perhaps the most intricate work of fiction Vargas Llosa has ever written together with *The War of the End of the World* (*La guerra del fin del mundo*, 1981)—is by no means accidental. Rather, it aligns with an overarching necessity to represent the social world of those years in its full complexity and explore the manifold ways in which a political phenomenon (namely, a dictatorship) affects a collectivity of individuals who come from very dissimilar backgrounds, in areas of human experience that have very little (or nothing) to do with politics. Therefore, the perplexity with which the average reader approaches the novel correlates with how hard it is to navigate the chapter of Peruvian history depicted in the fiction. The impulse to elaborate such an ambitious chronicle of corruption derives from the well-known project of 'the total novel' Vargas Llosa pursued in the trilogy of the sixties that culminated with *Conversation*.

José Miguel Oviedo, one the most eminent critics of Vargas Llosa's prose, argues that all of the techniques in the novel contribute to the realization of the famous novelistic ideal of its author: that is, the 'totalization' of the narrated reality to make it similar to the objective one (237). This is not to say that the book can be interpreted as a 'reflector' of social reality: on the contrary, the 'similarity' Oviedo talks about resides in the fact that the 'fictional reality' of the novel aspires to be as complicated as the social referent it portrays, and thus become a self-contained world. To conceive the novel simply as a mimesis of Peru under Odría's dictatorship is both misleading and reductive when one considers the pluralistic and

ambivalent vision the story gives us of that historical referent. Curiously, the rebellion against Odría in Arequipa, which is the most elaborate passage of the novel (there are 18 dialogues with no less than 16 different characters speaking at the same time), also constitutes the only historical event in the book (184).

In consonance with the title, the backbone of the novel is the four-hour conversation between Santiago (also known as 'Zavalita'), the son of Fermín Zavala, an important public servant of Odría's regime, and Ambrosio, the former chauffeur of Santiago' father, in a ruinous pub of Lima called "La Catedral". It is from this main dialogue that parallel conversations which take place in different temporal and spatial settings (apart from Lima, there are scenes in the cities of Pucallpa, Chincha, Cajamarca and Arequipa) start to unfold. Sabine Köllmann goes as far as to establish a correspondence between the increasing disorientation of the reader on account of the subordinate plot lines that develop throughout the novel, and that of the two interlocutors, "as they become more and more drunk and agitated" (84). As Santiago and Ambrosio attempt to rebuild the past of the country under the government of General Odría, other voices intrude in their conversation and give us access to quite dissimilar versions of life under the dictatorship, leaving the reader with more questions than answers.

According to Mary E. Davies, the orchestration of multiple dialogues in one major conversation is inspired on William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), a novel that also shares the theme of a revengeful son with *Conversation* (cited in Kristal 151). This narrative feature amply applies to the concept of the polyphonic novel first introduced by Mikhail Bakhtin in his study of Fyodor Dostoevsky's prose: "*a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices*" (6; italics in the

original). Yet, in Vargas Llosa's novel the voices of the characters are all merged into the same symphony, and it is often quite difficult to tell one from another, even to the most attentive reader. In the following 'telescopic dialogue', as José Miguel Oviedo calls them, it is possible to appreciate how three conversations that take place in different temporal and geographical locations interweave:

> "I'm going to ask you something," Santiago says. "Do I have the face of a son of a bitch?" (A)
>
> "And I'm going to tell you something," Popeye said. "Don't you think her [Amalia] going out to buy the Coca-Cola for us was strictly hypocritical? As if she was letting herself go to see if we'd repeat what happened the other night." (B)
>
> "You've got a rotten mind, Freckle Face," Santiago said. (B)
>
> "What a question," Ambrosio says. "Of course not, boy." (A)
>
> "O.K., so the breed girl is a saint and I've got a rotten mind," Popeye said. "Let's go to your house and listen to records, then." (B)
>
> "You did it for me?" Don Fermín asked. "For me, you poor black crazy son of a bitch?" (C)
>
> "I swear you don't, son." Ambrosio laughs. "Are you making fun of me?" (A)
>
> "Teté isn't home," Santiago said. "She went to an early show with some girlfriends." (B)
>
> "Listen, don't be a son of a bitch, Skinny," Popeye said. "You're lying, aren't you? You promised Skinny." (B)
>
> "You mean that sons of bitches don't have faces of sons of bitches, Ambrosio," Santiago says. (A)

(Vargas Llosa 1974 38; I have inserted the capital letters at the end of the sentences)

The diversity of characters that appear on the novel also sheds light on the way in which a dictatorship has palpable repercussions across very different socio-economic backgrounds. From prostitutes, factory workers and housemaids to clandestine communists, ministers and members of the military, all of the fictitious perspectives found in *Conversation in The Cathedral*—José Miguel Oviedo describes them as a 'pyramid of voices and political contexts' (183)—are representative of Peruvian society at large. Notably, apart from showing how fragmented/stratified society was at the time, the human composition of the book also attests to social issues that have configured Peruvian society—and Latin America in general—from its very beginnings, such as racism, misogyny, homophobia and classism. In effect, the various stories that come together in the narrative draw attention to the seemingly unsolvable state of injustice that afflicts the entire nation: "the only law individuals respect is supremacy" (Oviedo 219; my translation).

Faithful to the conception of the novel as a laboratory of narrative techniques he made conspicuous in his two previous novels (chiefly, in *The Green House*), Vargas Llosa experiments with the expressive possibilities of language to account as fully as possible for what the dictatorship of General Odría *meant* for Peruvians on a day-to-day basis. The parallel narrations we encounter are essential for the verisimilitude of the novel, insofar as they allow the reader to submerge in the chaotic world of the 'ochenio', and, in so doing, "to feel what it is like to live in Peru, to feel the very texture of a society as it is actually being lived" (Gallagher 1975 130). Beyond doubt, the structure of the novel, though irregular in length, is serviceable to the proliferation of angles through which the reader can approach the dictatorship of Odría: there are four books which cover a vast arrange of experiences

pertaining to characters who seemingly have little to do with each other; nevertheless, we soon discover that they all belong to the same puzzle, and that their stories are pivotal for the elucidation of the regime's all-pervading presence.

While the juxtaposition of simultaneous dialogues the reader finds in the novel is based on the technique Gustave Flaubert introduced on the well-known scene of the 'comices agricoles' in *Madame Bovary* (1856)—what Vargas Llosa calls 'communicating vessels'—, the writer recreates and enrichens the intermingling of different conversations by borrowing montage techniques from cinema, such as flashbacks, flash forwards, superimposition and cross-cutting (Köllmann 87). In an analysis of the connection between the seventh art and Vargas Llosa's work, Ronald Christ emphasizes the fact that instead of emulating an existing simultaneity, the implied author creates a completely new order in the narrated world: "Things coexist because he puts them together, not because they are thus related in Nature" (35). The novelist thus becomes the artificer of a reality that is neither alternative nor parallel, but unique and self-standing: indeed, a world as complex and unfathomable as the one we know.

1.2. Frustration and defeat

The labyrinthine experience that supposes reading *Conversation in The Cathedral* and exploring the social world it represents invites us to think of Vargas Llosa's generation, and the totality of Peruvian society between 1948 and 1959, as a lost and demoralized mass of people that cannot find a way out of its vicissitudes. Nevertheless, as we have established, far from reproducing history (which constitutes a utopian endeavour in itself), the 1969 novel shows the manifold repercussions the regime had for the lives of its subjects. From this standpoint, it is arguable that, by and large, society is the true protagonist of the narrative.

And yet, it is only through Santiago Zavala's story and its ramifications that we gain access to the socio-political life of the country and truly *understand* what it was like to live in the Peru of Odría.

As the majority of its critics have highlighted over the decades, apart from being a chronicle of corruption, *Conversation in The Cathedral* can also be read as a chronicle of frustration. Unlike *The Feast of the Goat*, *Conversation* is a deeply pessimistic work of fiction. Everyone in the novel seems to be encapsulated in a hostile and corrupt social environment that poses a considerable threat to their freedom of agency and thus perpetuates the moral degradation of its inhabitants and their institutions. It is this sense of permanent entrapment that Santiago alludes to after he saves his dog 'Batuque' ('Rowdy' in the English translation) from the dog pound in the first chapter: "You were saved from the pound, Rowdy, but no one's ever going to get you out of the pound you're in, Zavalita" (18), he tells himself as he returns to the middle-class neighbourhood in Miraflores where he lives with his wife Ana (the same neighbourhood where Vargas Llosa lived with his first wife, Julia Urquidi). It soon transpires that, although the phenomenon of the dictatorship has implications for the community as a whole, throughout the novel there is a clear emphasis on individual experience.

The opening lines of *Conversation in The Cathedral* allow us to establish an analogy between the fate of Santiago and that of the nation which underscores the key role the story of his family plays for the development of the plot:

> From the doorway of *La Crónica* Santiago looks at the Avenida Tacna without love: cars, uneven and faded buildings, the gaudy skeletons of posters floating in the midst, the gray midday. At what precise moment had Peru *fucked itself up*? […] He was like

> Peru, Zavalita was, he'd *fucked himself up* somewhere along the line. He thinks: when? […] Peru all *fucked up*, Carlitos all *fucked up*, everyone all *fucked up*. He thinks: there's no solution. (3; emphasis is mine)

The term 'fucked up'—a leitmotif that is repeated several times in the stream of consciousness of Santiago—not only acts as the guiding thread for the protagonist's search, and as a verbal recognition of his existential defeat (Oviedo 195), but it soon becomes the emblem for the totality of characters who inhabit the fictional world of *Conversation*. Indeed, the question formulated by Zavalita in the beginning of the novel ("At what precise moment had Peru fucked itself up?") has no simple answer and is indicative of the sociological complexity behind the picture of the country Vargas Llosa draws.

As the novel progresses, however, readers become more and more invested in Santiago's drama and the many other interlinked narratives—in particular, the stories of Ambrosio, Amalia, Fermín Zavala and Cayo Bermúdez—to the point that Zavalita's remark is better understood as a rhetorical question which lays emphasis on the most impenetrable aspects of the country's reality, rather than an invitation to rationalize the experience of the dictatorship, as a social scientist would do. Furthermore, the scarcity of dates in the book reinforces the idea that there is no concrete moment for a nation's downfall.

In light of this portrait of a society that lacks in alternatives, it should come as no surprise that the beginning and the end of the story can be found in the opening chapter. What Köllmann calls "the closed world of the novel" (95) is palpable in the author's painstaking demarcation of his fiction's boundaries (the self-contained quality inherent to the kind of novel Vargas Llosa aspires to write). While the last sentence of the first chapter marks the chronological ending of the story, the last phrase of the book (which is pronounced by

Ambrosio) coincides with the ending of the plot. Despite the hundreds of pages that separate them, both finales are evocative of the same pessimistic outlook:

> The curtain has one corner folded over and Santiago can see a chunk of almost dark sky, and imagine, outside, up above, falling down onto the houses and their elves, Miraflores, Lima, the same miserable drizzle as always. (20)
>
> […]
>
> He would work here and there, maybe after a while there'd be another outbreak of rabies and they'd call him in again, and after that here and there, and then, well, after that he would have died, wasn't that so, son? (601)

Admittedly, the most defining characteristic of Santiago is the fact that he is a rebel. When his brother asks him about his insolence towards their father in the second chapter, Santiago attributes it to his ties with the regime: "I only oppose him when he starts defending Odría and the militarists" (27). In many respects, the character of Zavalita constitutes an alter ego of the author. For instance, like Vargas Llosa, he goes to San Marcos University—a highly politicized university full of students from the popular classes—against the wishes of his family. There he becomes a member of "Cahuide", a clandestine communist cell to which Vargas Llosa also belonged during his first years at San Marcos.

Together with his friends Aída and Jacobo, Santiago reads Marxist works and writes for a communist journal that criticizes every move of Odría's government. Both Oviedo and Köllmann describe Santiago as a *declassé* (191, 102, respectively) inasmuch as he opposes the bourgeois values of his own family, which is part of the oligarchy, but he is also unable to integrate into the proletarian class whose interests he and his comrades profess to defend. Notwithstanding his ardent disapproval of the dictatorship and everything it represents for the

nation, Santiago is bombarded with doubts. As Oviedo suggests, his problem is that he cannot make a direct transition from thought to action (189), on account of his countless uncertainties. And it is this lack of faith in the revolution that leads to his imminent disillusionment with the cause of "Cahuide". Curiously, the cynicism of Zavalita is personified in the form of a 'little worm' that meddles in the narrative every other paragraph:

> Had it been that second year, Zavalita, when you saw that it wasn't enough to learn about Marxism, that you had to believe? What had probably fucked you up was that *lack of faith*, Zavalita […] The worst thing was to have doubts, Ambrosio, and the wonderful thing was to close your eyes and say God exists or God doesn't exist and believe it […] You couldn't, Zavalita, he thinks. He thinks: you were, you are, you always will be, you'll die a petit bourgeois [...] and suddenly *the little worm*: a lie, I don't believe. (99-101; both translation and italics are mine)

But apart from his failure as a communist militant, Santiago's masochistic self-interrogation about his past derives from his frustration as a writer. In Chapter 4 of Book One, the narrator reveals that Santiago is considering studying literature (63) and that he even writes poems in secret—his brother Sparky calls them "fairy poetry" (65), in a clear reference to the *macho*-culture belief that literature is an emasculating occupation—. In this sense, Zavalita's job as a journalist in *La Crónica* (again, Vargas Llosa worked there) is represented as a mediocre path to follow because he becomes a marginal writer of reports on mundane issues, such as dog rabies. Carlitos, another frustrated poet who ended up writing for the same newspaper, tells Santiago that "[a] person has to be crazy to work on a newspaper if he has any liking for literature, Zavalita" (202). Little by little, routine and conformity deprive Santiago of his illusions and turn him into a complier of the *status quo* against his will: "I get

in early, they give me my topic, I hold my nose, and in two or three hours all set, I unbuckle my chains and that's it" (4), he tells his friend and fellow journalist Norwin on the first page of the novel.

Köllmann asserts that never again does journalism appear as the complete negation of the literary vocation in Vargas Llosa's narrative (109). Moreover, she contends that the premature disintegration of Santiago's vocation as a writer also gave rise to an irreversible incapacity "to build alternative worlds, [as he had become] disillusioned about the possibilities to remain 'puro' in a world of corruption and filth" (101). The resignation of Zavalita aligns with a social world that is impossible to reform and, with the passage of time, the only freedom he can exercise is memory (Kristal 167): hence the convoluted network of time and space we talked about in the previous section. That is why all of the insight we get into Santiago's mind is indicative of an attempt to trace back the precise moment in which he sealed his fate.

Román Soto sees Santiago's personal journey from a young writer-to-be to a mediocre middle-class journalist as an inverted (and even satirical) version of the canonical "Bildungsroman" (68): indeed, the character of Zavalita in many ways seems to be the antihero par excellence. Yet, there is something heroic in his decision to give up the luxuries of his father's world because of its proximity to the power he so vehemently declines. Efraín Kristal compares the moral dimension of *Conversation* with that of Malraux' *La Condition Humaine* (1933) and goes as far as to suggest that the ordinary path chosen by Santiago can be interpreted as a definitive rupture with everything the dictatorship meant for the nation (150-156).

In a course he gave in Princeton almost six decades after the 'ochenio', Vargas Llosa reflects on what would have happened to him had he followed Santiago's path: "If I hadn't been able to move to Europe, I would probably have ended up psychologically frustrated just like Zavalita" (*Conversación en Princeton* 105; my translation). And yet, by virtue of the story of Santiago Zavala, the author is not only able to revisit different passages in his own life that took place during Odría's tyranny but also to reflect on the past of Peru from the perspective of a young man whose predicaments help illuminate the most sordid aspects of the regime.

1.3. A cartography of power, evil and secrets

In 1986, in an interview with Ricardo A. Setti, Vargas Llosa comments on the living model for the character of Cayo Bermúdez, also known as 'Cayo Mierda' ('Cayo Shithead'):

> [Alejandro Esparza Zañartu] was not a politician: he was a businessman who occupied that position [Director of Government] by pure chance. And there he found some sort of geniality, a very deep vocation and talent. He found his destiny, as Borges would say […] the day in which he discovered that position, which was quite anodyne, and insignificant, he transformed it into the backbone of the dictatorship. (Setti and Vargas Llosa 71; my translation)

Whereas the dictator only appears in a single line of Book Two from the distance of the Presidential balcony, Vargas Llosa makes his head of security the most notorious representative of the regime, and, by implication, the main antagonist of the novel.

In the third chapter of Book One we learn about the marginal origins of Bermúdez in Chincha (an impoverished province on the south of Peru) and how he became Minister of the Interior because of his friendship with Minister Espina. Perhaps the most striking piece of

information in his introduction to the reader is the fact that he lacks the political ambition one would expect a leader of his stature to have. Further on in the novel he reaffirms his apolitical nature: “the fact is I am bored by them […] I don’t understand anything about politics. Don’t laugh, it’s true” (127). It gradually transpires that Cayo Bermúdez is committed to a single mission from the moment he becomes head of security: to perpetuate the power of the dictatorship at all costs (Köllmann 113). And, like Esparza Zañartu, he does perform his duties with great efficiency. In fact, the author endows him with exceptional qualities in his command of the nation that anticipate the virtues of other strong men of autocratic regimes in his fiction, such as Antonio Conselheiro in *The War of the End of the World*, Johnny Abbes García in *The Feast of the Goat* and Vladimiro Montesinos in *The Neighbourhood* (*Cinco esquinas*, 2016).

In an essay that examines what he calls the ‘theology of power’ in Vargas Llosa’s novels, Peruvian novelist Alonso Cueto maintains that the identity of his characters derives from the nature of their relationship with power: “Vargas Llosa conceives human beings as unwavering wills […] that test themselves in the fight for and against power. But if [he] sees reality as a permanent battle, his heart is always closer to the rebels, to the transgressors, to the rebels” (588; my translation). Even though he is not naturally inclined to follow a political career, Cayo certainly takes advantage of his vicinity to the central power to climb the social ladder, compensate for his poor roots and give flesh to his most perverse desires. Unlike Zavalita, the main rebel of the novel, he is a man of action who is willing to act in a cold-blooded manner in order to ensure the unrivaled supremacy of his master.

Throughout the novel Cayo is depicted as a calculating, unsympathetic, vicious and even terrifying figure who incarnates immoral behaviour. This characterization echoes the

value Vargas Llosa assigns to Georges Bataille's philosophical postulates on literature as a channel of expression for Evil: "La littérature est l'essentiel, ou n'est rien. Le Mal –une forme de aiguë du Mal— dont elle est l'expression, a pour nous, je le crois, la valeur souveraine" (Bataille 197). Cayo's evilness is evinced in the fact that he operates without any sense of guilt and takes pride in domesticating the masses for the benefit of Odría's government:

> "At first I thought you were only posing as a cynic," [Major Paredes] said then. "Now I'm convinced you really are. You don't believe in anything or anybody, Cayo."
>
> "I'm not paid to believe, I'm paid to do my job." He smiled again. "And I'm doing a good job, right?" (242)

As a facilitator of power with impunity, the identity of Bermúdez consolidates as soon as he is entrusted with the task of eliminating all forms of dissidence, albeit with the discrepancies that often generates the psychological depth of 'round' characters.

In effect, there is something contradictory between the portrayal of Cayo the man and that of Cayo the untouchable head of security. Through Amalia's voice the reader is able to imagine the cartoonish aspect of Odría's strong man: "Don Cayo was very small, his face was leathery, his hair yellowish like shredded tobacco, sunken eyes that looked coldly and from a distance, wrinkles on his neck, an almost lipless mouth and teeth stained from smoking" (199). Nonetheless, this opaque government functionary succeeds in deploying a sophisticated machinery of repression that blurs the boundaries between appearance and reality (Gallagher 590), transforming himself into "an authentic priest of corruption" (Oviedo 203; my translation). At the same time, it is fundamental to bear in mind that Cayo is a perpetuator of the corruptive system that infests the social world of *Conversation*, and not its creator (Köllmann 112). Yet, it is very likely that without Bermúdez that apparatus would not have

reached the levels of criminality, censorship and manipulation one finds in the chapters dedicated to him and his political maneuvers.

In consonance with the name of 'Cayo Mierda', the description of Lima is almost always based on a long repertoire of scatological images. Without exception, the capital of Peru, the decaying world where Odría governs, is depicted both as an inhospitable and disgusting place to live in. The narrator's description of the dog pound as a metaphor for the state of the city and the country is very telling:

> A broad yard surrounded by a run-down, *shit-colored* adobe wall—the color of Lima, he thinks, the color of Peru—flanked by shacks that mix and thicken in the distance until they turn into a labyrinth of straw mats, poles, tiles, zinc plates […] In Peru we're still living in the stone age, friend. (8-10; emphasis is mine)

Oviedo recalls a quote by Manuel González Prada (1844-1918), a very influential Peruvian intellectual and anarchist, in which he compares the nation to a sick organism (215). In spite of the self-protective mechanisms individuals employ against such a deprecatory atmosphere, destinies are finalized. Vargas Llosa's realistic approach to the dictatorship compels the reader to sink in the mud of hopelessness faced by the Peruvian population of the 1950s and relive the wild extremes society reached under Odría and Cayo's administration of the state. Rosa Boldori develops the concept of "environmental determinism" (24) to denote the individual's inability to modify (or even escape from) the social and geographical conditions of his or her environment. In that regard, the stagnation of the country coheres with the sense of dilapidation stimulated by the references to excrement that fester the book.

But even more repulsive than the descriptions of the city are those of the world of sexual fantasies Cayo has created in the house he bought for his mistress Hortensia, better

known as “La Musa”. The first sign of his obsession with his libido takes place when he arrives in Lima and buys a pornographic novel titled *The Mysteries of Lesbos* (57). Hedy Habra draws attention to the way in which Cayo’s voyeuristic vocation is revealed through the perspective of Amalia, the former maid of Fermín Zavala who then works at Hortensia’s house of pleasure in the district of San Miguel (23). Just as he sees the illustrations of his pornographic book, Cayo enjoys watching Hortensia have sex with Queta, and even participating in orgies with renowned supporters of Odría’s government:

> Behind some fluttering sheer curtains the two shadows dropped down beside each other in heat on a feather mattress that received them noiselessly […] the shadows clung together and rolled and were one single form on the white sheets under the curtains: he too was convinced that the visit would be a success, gentlemen […] The rally would be an unprecedented success, Don Cayo, the senator interrupted him […] and behind the curtains it was all muffled sounds, rubbing and soft panting, an agitation of sheets and hands and mouths and skin that sought each other out and came together. (289)

Hortensia’s house is depicted as a receptacle of the head of security’s innermost desires. Desires which in turn are emblematic of the deep-seated culture of *machismo* in Latin America that objectifies and degrades women. For instance, the dramatic story of Amalia—a key character in the structure of the narrative because, just like Ambrosio, she acts as a bridge between the world of Fermín Zavala and that of Cayo Bermúdez—is reminiscent of thousands of Peruvian women from the lower classes who are subject to endless humiliations and end up losing their fundamental rights. Furthermore, the monopoly of brothels, pubs and cabarets Cayo has under his control allows him to seduce and blackmail many of the regime’s servants

(Habra 27). There is no denying that sex becomes a means of redemption in the context of a totalitarian regime that dehumanizes people. But, in the case of Cayo, eroticism becomes as perverted as his relationship with power and underscores the portrayal of private life as an extension of dirty politics. Indeed, as one of the characters says in the novel, "you're closer to [the truth] in a whorehouse than in a convent" (143).

It should come as no surprise, then, that the narrative conflates the unknown with the grotesque. Vargas Llosa avails himself of the technique of the 'dato escondido' (narration by omission) to create suspense and reinforce the 1969 novel's climate of ambivalence. The secret of Fermín Zavala's homoerotic relationship with Ambrosio is not less repugnant than Cayo's erotic fantasies and it cements the ruin of his family (not to mention the aggravation of Zavalita's frustrations). Behind a façade of respectability, Fermín, who is jokingly called "Bola de Oro", makes Ambrosio his sexual servant, taking advantage of the latter's naïveté and stoic personality: "He didn't sit in [the] back the way he should have, but next to me. That was when I had my suspicions, but I couldn't believe that was it. It couldn't be, not in the case of *someone like him*" (550-551; italics is mine). Ambrosio's masochistic loyalty to his boss eventually compels him to murder Hortensia— "You did it for me?" (38), Fermín Zavala asks him in one of the telescopic dialogues of Book One—when he realizes she had been blackmailing 'Bola de Oro'. But all of this information is strategically presented to the reader, as he becomes more and more familiar with a society where absolute power has contaminated human relations, made transgression the norm and distorted the truth beyond repair.

1.4. A socialist novel?

Two years before the publication of *Conversation in The Cathedral*, Vargas Llosa gave a speech titled "Literature is Fire" ("La literatura es fuego") upon receiving the Rómulo

Gallegos Prize in Venezuela for *The Green House* (1966). At the time, like many other Latin American writers, he embraced socialism and advocated for the deep social transformations of the Cuban Revolution. In a particularly solemn passage of the speech the author proclaims:

> American reality, there is no doubt, offers the writer a great feast of reasons to be unsubmissive and remain unsatisfied […] our tumultuous lands provide us with a supply of exemplary material to show in fiction, either directly or indirectly, through facts, dreams, testimonies, allegories, nightmares or visions, that reality is not made right, that life must change. (*Contra viento y marea I* 179; my translation)

At the heart of this impassioned manifesto on literature and politics, there is an understanding of literary vocation as a civic commitment with the dilemmas of the writer's time and, by extension, the need to reform the very foundations of society—that is, a call for revolution.

In his youth, Vargas Llosa learned a lesson from Jean Paul Sartre's famous essay *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* (Gallimard, 1948) that was decisive for the way in which he approached creative writing. Namely, that words have an extraordinary potential to alter reality: "L'écrivain engagé sait que la parole est action: il sait que dévoiler c'est changer, et qu'on ne peut dévoiler qu'en projetant de changer" (Sartre 27). Indeed, the hyperbolic phrasing of the 1967 speech unequivocally communicates to its hearers (now readers) a conception of literature as a platform for turbulence and insurgence, in accordance with the tenets of Marxism. Köllmann draws attention to the way in which the "rhetoric of radicality" (40) that informs the speech obliterates all doubts and leaves no room for counterarguments. In fact, Vargas Llosa ventures to make a number of prophetic assertions that concern the destiny of the region at large:

> Ten, twenty or fifty years from now the time for social justice will have arrived in all our countries—like now in Cuba—and Latin America at large will have emancipated from the empire that sacks it, from the casts that exploit it, from the forces that today offend and repress it. (*Contra viento y marea I* 179; my translation)

As such, in light of the maxims presented in the speech, the social function of the writer is that of an agitator of the masses; someone who makes them conscious of the flaws of the status quo, denounces them, and promotes a rebellious spirit against any form of oppression.

Efraín Kristal identifies a 'socialist' period in Vargas Llosa's fiction which coincides with the three novels he published in the 1960s, a time when most writers in Latin America were ardent supporters of Fidel Castro and the Soviet Union: according to Kristal, the 1969 novel is "in tune with [the author's] socialist conviction that capitalist society is inherently beyond reform" (1998 66). However, notwithstanding the (over)enthusiasm of Vargas Llosa as a young intellectual with the idea of revolution, a close reading of *Conversation in The Cathedral* reveals a work of fiction that persistently refrains from supporting a particular political or ideological agenda. As much as the novel exposes the most sordid aspects of the regime, it is not possible to recognise an explicit denunciation of Odría's dictatorship which simultaneously condemns the repression of those years and offers a validation of socialism as the antidote to totalitarian regimes.

Even though "Literature is Fire" is full of categorical assertions, the story Vargas Llosa was creating around that time turned out to be the total antipode of such an intransigent approach to social reality. As we have explained in the previous sections, the novel offers a multi-dimensional and largely ambiguous portrayal of Peru in the early 1950s with a multitude of characters whose experiences of the dictatorship diverge from that of the author.

To a great extent, the pessimistic overtones of the narrative are equally applicable to both living under the shadow of an autocratic regime and the attempts to alter that situation. For one thing, the fact that Zavalita's socialist hopes as a member of "Cahuide" never come to fruition is not gratuitous. There is no sense of resolution, no possible escape from the claustrophobic and chaotic atmosphere of the novel, which is enhanced by the complexity of its narrative techniques. In line with his overriding need to investigate and understand his social experience, the novelist shows the reader how Odría's regime impinges upon the lives of Santiago, his family, those who surround them, and ultimately Peruvian society as a whole. But he does so without formulating a political alternative that meddles with the artistic representation of his social referent, thereby "[undermining] the idea of an interconnected rebellion in literature and politics" (Köllmann 112). In the first half of the book, Ambrosio asks Santiago "Wasn't this country a can of worms, boy, wasn't Peru a brain-twister?" (15). In writing this ambitious novel Vargas Llosa exercised his freedom as an author of fiction to explore the "brain-twister" that was—still is—the *ochenio* (and Peruvian reality as a whole), taking as many liberties as he deemed necessary, and at times even contradicting his own political convictions.

Conversation in The Cathedral—and, for that matter, the whole novelistic production of Vargas Llosa—neither aspires to be, nor is, a political pamphlet. Despite his repudiation of dictatorships, the author did not let his political convictions at the time (which in fact had already started to fade) determine the shape and content of his craft. And yet again, the purpose of literature that Vargas Llosa advocated for in "Literature is Fire" has not been entirely dispelled in his conception of fiction. Although in a less radical way than the 1967 speech, throughout his career he has been adamant that literature plays a key role in

stimulating the formation of a critical attitude in readers, and that, as such, it has practical repercussions for them as active members of society (Köllmann 76). Unlike the characters of many of his earlier works of fiction, who are depicted as the victims of dark machinations, the readers of Vargas Llosa's novels become more conscious of the many deficiencies of their societies, learn to value their freedom, and are thus motivated to imagine better, as the author pointed out in a speech he gave in the Oslo Freedom Forum:

> Without [literature], the critical mind, which is the real engine of historical change and the best protector of liberty, will suffer an irreparable loss. This is because all good literature is radical and poses radical questions about the world in which we live. In all great literary texts, often without their authors intending it, its seditious inclination is present. Literature says nothing to those human beings who are satisfied with their lot, who are content with life as they now live it. Literature is the food of the rebellious spirit, the promulgator of non-conformities, the refuge for those who have too much or too little in life. One seeks sanctuary in literature so as not to be unhappy, and so as not to be incomplete. (2013)

CHAPTER 2: A TYRANT IN THE CARIBBEAN

2.1. The 'total novel' revisited

In the year 2000, over three decades after the publication of *Conversation in The Cathedral*, Mario Vargas Llosa published another dictatorship novel titled *The Feast of the Goat* (*La fiesta del Chivo*, 2000). In the lapse of those thirty years, he cultivated very different kinds of genres, ranging from novels where he explored the nature of fanaticism, to melodrama, crime mystery, and erotic fiction. Moreover, as an indefatigable commentator of reality, he also continued writing essays and articles in which he opined on a wide range of topics. Moving away from Peru for the first time since the publication of *The War of the End of the World* in 1981, Vargas Llosa chose as social referent for his new novel the totalitarian regime of Rafael Leonidas Trujillo Molina, dictator of the Dominican Republic from 1930 to 1961. As is the case with the vast majority of Vargas Llosa's literary creations, the idea to write *The Feast of the Goat* gradually germinated from a personal experience of the author:

> I made the decision to write this novel following a trip to the Dominican Republic in 1974 or 1975 […] The French Radio and Television Broadcasting company had hired me to write a script for a documentary […] And I was deeply shocked by what I heard about Trujillo, who had already been dead for over a decade. People had lost their fear and talked much more freely about the dictatorship, which I had heard about when I was a student in Peru. In the fifties, Latin America was plagued with dictators from one end to the other, but perhaps the most picturesque, histrionic and cruel was Trujillo. (*Conversación en Princeton* 211-212; my translation)

The return to the socio-political commitment palpable in Vargas Llosa's narratives from the 1960s was received with much enthusiasm by critics and the public, and the book

soon became a publishing phenomenon on both sides of the Atlantic. Not only was the initial print run of ten thousand copies completely sold out one day after the launching of the novel in Spain, but there were also various manifestations of its popularity in all of the cities that were part of the book tour, including Santo Domingo, Buenos Aires, Lima, Mexico City and Miami (Gewecke 151). The presentation of the novel in the hotel Jaragua of Santo Domingo—the same place where we see Urania in the beginning and the ending of the story—congregated a thousand people (Armas Marcelo 443). And despite the many threats coming from former Trujillo supporters, who accused the author of spreading a false image of what had happened in the country, there were no further complications (Gewecke 153). As Gene H. Bell-Villada rightly points out, "it's not every day that a serious, complex work of literary *and* political fiction arouses such broadly based interest" (140). There even was a film adaptation directed by Luis Llosa in 2005, which featured Isabella Rossellini, Paul Freeman and Tomás Milián. Indeed, the commercial success of the novel attests to the key function of gatekeepers such as editors, publishers, and distributors in the promotion of the book, as well as the high level of expectation of Vargas Llosa's readership for a novel that explored the crudest manifestations of absolute power, in the same line of his early works.

Just like *Conversation in The Cathedral*, *The Feast of the Goat* delves into the manifold implications an authoritarian regime has in the history of a nation and the lives of its citizens—but it is much more than a political novel. In dealing with both the public and the private spheres, the novel provides an invaluable account of Dominican society during the regime of the 'Generalísimo', which gives rise to a diversity of classifications, in addition to the sub-genre of the dictatorship novel. In this regard, *The Feast of the Goat* may equally qualify to be called a historical novel, a mystery novel, a psychological novel, a political

thriller or even a moral novel. All of these categories are reminiscent of Vargas Llosa's definition of the 'total novel' in his essays on *Tirant lo Blanc*, a Valencian chivalric novel whose publication inaugurated a novelistic tradition that competes with reality:

> Martorell was the first in this lineage of 'deicides'—Fielding, Balzac, Flaubert, Tolstoi, Joyce, Faulkner—who pretend to create in their novels a "total reality", the most remote case of an almighty, disinterested, omniscient and ubiquitous novelist […] It is extremely difficult to classify the novel of Martorell because all of the definitions suit it but none of them does it justice. (*Carta de batalla por Tirant lo Blanc* 11; my translation)

The utopian project of the totalization of social experience that transpired from Vargas Llosa's most ambitious novels towards the end of the 1960s is revisited in this new dictator narrative, albeit with some substantial differences I will explain in due course. Some of the features it has in common with the early works that have been repeatedly mentioned by the critics are "its sober realism, the absence of any erotic or metafictional playfulness, and its old-fashioned commitment to denouncing political evils" (Köllmann 244-245). The permanent fascination of Vargas Llosa with a past whose effects so heavily weigh upon the present aligns with his unchanged conception of the writer, and more specifically, of the writer of novels, as a man who aims to capture as much as possible of social reality: "Rescuer and verbal gravedigger of an epoch, the great novelist is a kind of vulture: the putrid flesh of history is his favourite nourishment and has served to inspire him to his most audacious undertakings" (cited in Brody 517).

There is no doubt that Vargas Llosa is one of the most "technically conscious authors in history" (Bell-Villada 152). Similar to the Faulknerian alternating plots of *Conversation in*

The Cathedral, there are three main stories that interweave in *The Feast of the Goat*: the return of Urania—a successful middle-aged lawyer who works in Manhattan—to Santo Domingo after 25 years of absence; the last day in the life of Trujillo, narrated from the perspective of the tyrant; and the story of the four conspirators who are waiting for Trujillo's blue Chevrolet in order to materialize the magnicide that takes place in Chapter XII. The painstaking structuring of the first 12 chapters, based on the three thematic units outlined above, has the following sequence: Chapters I, IV, VII, and X are dedicated to Urania's reunion with her father; Chapters II, V, VIII, and XI to Trujillo's routines before he dies; and Chapters III, VI, IX, and XII to the rebels on the *Malecón*, ready to kill the 'Beast'. Following the death of the dictator, which coincides with the ending of the first half of the novel, the structure takes a new course and shows Urania revealing to her aunt and cousins that Trujillo raped her thanks to her own father, the sadistic persecution of the assassins and their supporters by the remaining members of the regime, and the dramatic challenges faced by the Dominican people as Trujillo's legacy lives on. Notably, some of the last chapters of the novel provide an account of Joaquín Balaguer's key role in the transition from authoritarianism to democracy.

In spite of this complex structure, the book is considerably more accessible than novels like *The Green House* (*La casa verde*, 1966) or *Conversation in The Cathedral*, where the young author had exploited the expressive possibilities of language to the point that it could be quite difficult for the average reader to follow the plot. And yet, this fundamental change in narrative form (especially when compared with his previous dictatorship novel) does not correlate with a more easily discernible social reality. This is particularly true of a totalitarian system that perpetuates a state of abnormality, in which there are no limits for

manipulation, coercion and brutality. According to Sabine Köllmann, there are at least two elements that prevail in all three of Vargas Llosa's major works of political fiction: *Conversation in The Cathedral* (1969), *The War at the End of the World* (1981) and *The Feast of Goat* (2000). Namely, the investigation of political questions within a particular historical context in order to shed light on the most essential issues of Latin American nations, coupled with the importance of story-telling itself and the social function of the writer and intellectual (12-13). Therefore, it is possible to characterize Vargas Llosa, first and foremost, as a writer who has an overarching impulse to make sense of the world that surrounds him, both in his fictional and in his non-fictional facet.

2.2. A dictator that is everywhere

Perhaps the most conspicuous difference between the two dictatorship novels written by Vargas Llosa is the fact that, unlike Odría, who appears in a single line of *Conversation in The Cathedral*, Trujillo's presence is palpable in virtually every page of *The Feast of the Goat*. Similar to the portrayal of Peruvian society during Odría's government, all through the narrative prevails an environment of profound corruption, full of excessiveness, decay, sheer cruelty and constrictions of liberty. However, in contrast to the 1969 novel, this atmosphere derives from the all-pervading figure of the Dominican tyrant.

The representation of Trujillo as the incarnation of unlimited power with impunity exemplifies the way in which Vargas Llosa utilizes historical sources as a raw-material to build a fictional world that eventually emancipates from its social referent, in order to illustrate a phenomenon that makes the past (and the present) of many Latin American nations converge. Admittedly, the image of Trujillo as the 'strong man' who takes over the control of a whole nation and imposes his desires upon the population at large is emblematic of the

region's deep-rooted dictatorial tradition, as the critics, and Vargas Llosa himself, have reiterated over the years:

> I wrote *The Feast of the Goat* fundamentally thinking about Trujillo—but I also thought about dictatorships in general, which have a lot of things in common. Owing to the fact that there is a common denominator in totalitarian systems, I also took advantage of my experience in the regime of Odría in Peru, and what I knew about the other dictators who were active in those years: Somoza in Nicaragua, Pérez Jiménez in Venezuela, Rojas Pinilla in Colombia and Perón in Argentina. (*Conversación en Princeton* 220; my translation)

In this sense, *The Feast of the Goat* constitutes an inquiry into the humiliating and demoralizing effects of a society whose rights—political and human—have been revoked by the will of an individual who exercises power by virtue of his charisma, intimidation and corruption (Kristal 2018 414). Of course, this interpretation of the ominous force the dictator exerts on the population applies to most of the autocrats who appear in the annals of political history. Nevertheless, the characterization of Trujillo is indicative of a leader that is much more histrionic, bloodthirsty, ostentatious and seductive than the average Latin American tyrant. By comparison, for instance, Odría was a rather mediocre figure who lurked in the shadows of an oppressive system whose most sinister representative was 'Cayo Mierda' (a character whose equivalent in *The Feast of the Goat* is Johnny Abbes, the heartless leader of the Intelligence Service).

As the uncontested ruler of the Dominican Republic, Trujillo assumes a tutelary or even paternalistic function in relation to his subjects. Deeply ingrained in the consciousness of the Dominican people lies a cult of personality that "[establishes] an indissoluble link between

the welfare of the country and its 'Father' and 'Benefactor'" (Köllmann 259). The transformation of Trujillo the man into a worshipful, idealized kind of being is presented as the result of a very sophisticated process of indoctrination that took advantage of propaganda, resorted to violence as a tool of intimidation, and domesticated the masses until they were deprived of their free will, as Urania reminds her father in their reunion (Vargas Llosa 76). Trujillo's unparalleled demagogic abilities find an echo in Weber's definition of charismatic leadership:

> All extraordinary needs, i.e., those which transcend the sphere of everyday economic routines, have always been satisfied in an entirely heterogeneous manner: on a charismatic basis… It means the following: that the "natural" leaders in moments of distress—whether psychic, physical, economic, ethical, religious, or political—were neither appointed officeholders nor "professionals" in the present-day sense (i.e., persons performing against compensation a "profession" based on training and special expertise), but rather the bearers of specific gifts of body and mind that were considered "supernatural" (Weber 1111-1112)

The illusion of a proximity between the masses and the dictator is instrumental in the consolidation and prolongation of the cult of personality. During a conversation with Senator Henry Chirinos, whom the 'Jefe' calls "The Walking Turd" (16), Trujillo reflects on how many times he has accepted to become the godfather of babies from the lower classes in order to gain the subservience of ordinary Dominicans: "To be compadres with a campesino, a laborer […] was to guarantee the *loyalty* of the poor man and poor woman whom he embraced after the baptism of his godchild and whom he presented with two thousand pesos" (125; italics is mine).

Trujillo is not only aware of the impossible responsibility he carries on his shoulders, but he repeatedly acknowledges its burdensome nature in the chapters dedicated to him: "What would happen to the country when he died?" (20); "he had been carrying the weight of a country on his shoulders for almost thirty-two years" (23). Yet, he continues feeding the mythic representation of himself as the 'Father of the Fatherland' to maintain his power intact. Moreover, it also becomes apparent that he is fully committed to the perpetuation of this fiction because of his obsession with posterity, and the image of himself that will transcend in the 'official' history of the Dominican Republic. That is, in part, why he constantly complains about his sons Ramfis and Radhamés, whose lack of discipline makes them unfit for ruling the nation, and thus preserving the legacy of their father (33). In his inner thoughts, the dictator goes as far as to justify his most despicable deeds on the grounds that they are necessary for the better good of the nation:

> It was true, there were no ties like blood. That must be why he felt so tied to this country of ingrates, cowards, and traitors. Because in order to pull it out of backwardness, chaos, ignorance, and barbarism, he had often been stained with blood. Would these assholes thank him for it in the future? (71)

Notwithstanding the evidence of an intimate connection between the tyrant and his followers, Trujillo is always described in the public sphere as some sort of sacrosanct figure, that is, as an object of adoration that symbolizes the prosperity of the country and its inhabitants. In fact, patriotism and nationalism became forms of narcissism during the Trujillo Era precisely because the Dominican Republic was seen an extension of the dictator (Kristal 2018 417). The fact that Santo Domingo was called "Ciudad Trujillo" for the duration of the dictatorship attests to this phenomenon, together with Trujillo's fascination with titles, as

Urania remembers the capital city's "reverence for the Chief, the Generalissimo, the Benefactor, the Father of the New Nation, His Excellency Dr. Rafael Leonidas Trujillo Molina" (6) in the opening chapter. Therefore, the characterization of the dictator as a superior being not only renders him unreachable for common citizens but it also accentuates the dehumanization of the historical personage.

Similar to other dictatorship novels, throughout *The Feast of the Goat* there are numerous passages in which the dictator is endowed with supernatural qualities. For instance, in the second chapter of the novel, when we are first introduced to the dictator, the narrator provides a meticulous account of his exceptional physical endurance. The reader is told that Trujillo needs very few hours of sleep (28) and that his body does not sweat unless he gives it permission to do so (30). According to the narrator, Trujillo's excessive care of hygiene mirrors that of Petronius, the protagonist of Henryk Sienkiewicz's *Quo Vadis?* (1896), "a novel the [despot] read when he was young, the only one he ever thought about" (24). But it is actually Nero—the Roman emperor who also appears in Sienkiewicz's novel—and his gruesome vanity that most overtly invites comparison with the Dominican tyrant (Köllmann 269). On the other hand, the religious overtones of Trujillo's descriptions also make allusion to his god-like or even messianic position within the social macrocosm of the novel: "Trujillo could turn water into wine and multiply loaves of bread if he fucking well felt like it" (17).

It is important to note, however, that Trujillo's superhuman powers are inexorably linked to his personification of Evil. A paratextual element that reinforces such a depiction is the cover art chosen for the novel, which shows a fragment of Ambrogio Lorenzetti's fresco *Allegory of Bad Government* (Siena, circa 1338). Beyond doubt, the most striking feature of

the painting is the tyrant with fangs and horns—an ornamentation that is clearly reminiscent of the devil—who rests his feet upon a goat as he sits on his throne.

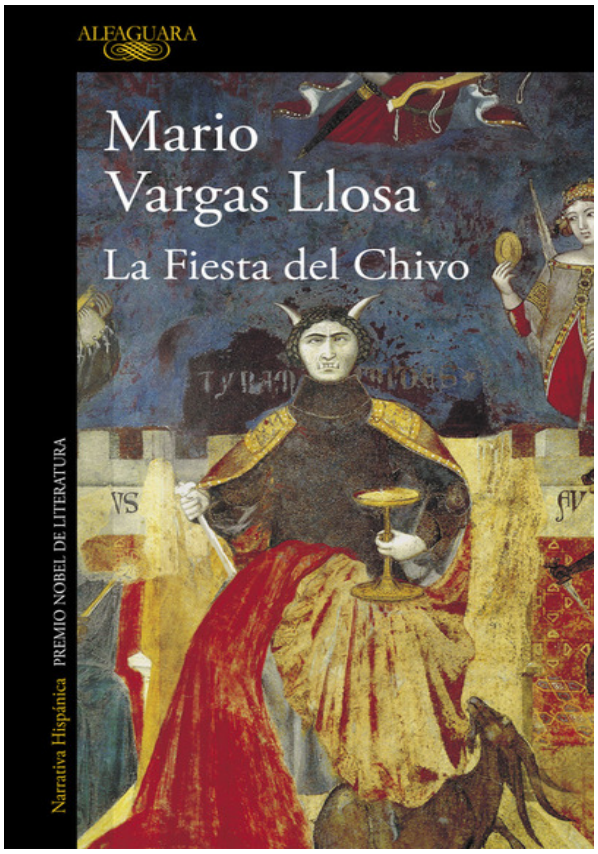

Fig. 1: Ambrogio Lorenzetti's "Allegory of Bad Government" reproduced in the frontcover of *La Fiesta del Chivo* (Alfaguara, 2019).

A very similar image is conveyed to the reader when Lieutenant García Guerrero, who eventually becomes one of the conspirators, evokes Trujillo's devilish gaze:

> A gaze that no one could endure without lowering his own eyes, intimidated and annihilated by the force radiating from those piercing eyes that seemed to read one's most secret thoughts and most hidden desires and appetites, and made people feel naked. (31)

And yet, according to Sabine Köllmann, far from being constricted by the conventions of the dictatorship novel genre or the historical sources themselves, the deification of Trujillo makes him "an integral part of Vargas Llosa's own fictional world" (267), where fanatics abound.

Many critics have highlighted the fact that, even after his assassination, Trujillo's presence permeates the course of the narrative. The vestiges of the dictatorship acquire a central role in the second half of the novel by virtue of the sadistic persecution of the tyrannicide's perpetrators, the telling of Urania's story, and the manifold challenges to the reconstruction of democracy. Indeed, in keeping with his megalomania and the deep state of corruption he has established in the Dominican Republic, "the 'survival' of Trujillo […] dramatises the extraordinary power he wielded over his countrymen's lives and minds" (Griffin 120). That is why, following her confession, Urania tells Aunt Adelina that "Something from those times is still in the air" (Vargas Llosa 401).

But perhaps even more significant than the expansive shadow of the past over the present is the fact that Trujillo—not unlike many of totalitarian figures in history—disdains the value of literature. He calls literary works "bullshit" (224) and launches into rants against artists and intellectuals in which he describes them as "spineless" individuals who "have no sense of honor, they tend to be traitors and are very servile" (224). However, there is an exception to the rule. For him, out of the almost infinite possibilities offered by the world of letters, there is only a speech ostentatiously titled "God and Trujillo: A Realistic Interpretation", given by Joaquín Balaguer in the Theatre of Fine Arts when he became a member of the Academy of Language. The omniscient narrator condenses the contents of the conference with great expressive force:

> The Dominican Republic had survived more than four centuries—four hundred thirty-eight years—of countless adversities, including buccaneers, Haitian invasions, attempts at annexation, the massacre and flight of whites (only sixty thousand remained where it declared its emancipation from Haiti), because of *Divine Providence*. Until now, the task had been assumed directly by the *Creator*. But in 1930, Rafael Leonidas Trujillo Molina had relieved *God* of this arduous mission. (225; emphasis added)

Clearly, the speech of Balaguer is nothing but a lie disguised as absolute truth. This is illustrated by the allusion to the designs of "Divine Providence", its supernatural forces, and the will of a "Creator" (225) who passes on the control of the nation to Trujillo. In effect, as Rubén Gallo contends in *Conversación in Princeton*, throughout the novel there is a prophetic, almost religious use of language (231) that exalts the investiture of Trujillo as the father, owner and benefactor of the Dominican nation. It is not accidental, however, that the omniscient narrator gives the reader access to the doubt that afflicts the dictator after hearing the messianic sentences of his political puppet: "Balaguer's speech had moved him deeply and often led to wonder if it might not express a profound *truth*, one of those unfathomable divine decisions that make the destiny of a people" (224; italics is mine). And yet again, this fiction did not bear fruit accidentally, but it was the product of intellectuals whose efforts were pivotal to the consolidation of Trujillo's totalitarian system.

2.3. On individual agency and the corruptive nature of power

Like *Conversation in The Cathedral*, *The Feast of the Goat* gives the reader a unique insight into what living under the shadow of a dictatorial regime *feels* like from different angles. Yet, unlike Vargas Llosa's first dictatorship novel, the scope of this literary testimony

is generally limited to the entourage of the dictator, as "ordinary Dominicans hardly impinge on the narrative" (Griffin 122). Instead of having a negative impact on the plausibility of the story, the experiences of those who have closer ties with Trujillo are symptomatic of the shared responsibility of societies at large under a dictatorial regime, insofar as the proximity to power implies an exposure to the higher levels of corruption in the social world the author explores. In a dictatorship, the masses do not usually get to choose: they are deprived of their freedom to discern between good and evil and make decisions that compromise their morality. Conversely, in the case of Trujillo's supporters—particularly the intellectual class and the conspirators—the theme of individual agency is of paramount importance.

Apart from Joaquín Balaguer, who was a historical figure, there are two other men of letters who contributed to create the myth of Trujillo in the literary world of Vargas Llosa: Agustín 'Egghead' Cabral and Henry Chirinos, both of whom are fictional characters modelled on a number of historical referents. The three of them are, each in their own way, the artificers of Trujillo's mythical position in the Dominican Republic (Köllmann 290). By means of their intelligence and persuasive rhetoric, these men propagated the cult of personality of Trujillo, and thus provided a solid foundation for his totalitarian control of the nation. For instance, the aforementioned speech of Balaguer was edited every year by the "Trujillonian Institute" and it was a mandatory reading in the schools, and a central text of the "Civics Handbook", a document elaborated by Balaguer, Cabral and Chirinos in order to indoctrinate the younger generations of Dominicans into the "Trujillista Doctrine" (226). Suffice it to say that without the collective intervention of these intellectuals, the institutionalization of Trujillo's superiority and paternalistic role would have been practically

impossible. As Clive Griffin argues, "If Trujillo was a monster, it was others who made him so" (124).

In her monologue, Urania reveals that she has never been able to understand the docility of the most intelligent men in the country towards Trujillo:

> […] what you've never understood is how the best-educated Dominicans, the intellectuals of the country, the lawyers, doctors, engineers, often graduates of very good universities in the United States or Europe, sensitive, cultivated men of experience, wide reading, ideas, presumably possessing a highly developed sense of the ridiculous, men of feeding and scruples, could allow themselves to be […] savagely abused […]. (54)

While the novel does not explicitly provide explanations for the behaviour of these cultivated men, the reader can reach his or her own conclusions. Henry Chirinos, a lawyer, historian and poet who is in charge of the jurisdiction of the regime, is represented as an opportunist whose sole interest is to make profit. In fact, out of the three, 'Egghead' Cabral seems to be the only one who supports the regime because he actually *believes* in Trujillo's fiction (293). His admiration for the 'Generalísimo' not only makes him embrace his leader's ideas to make the country prosper, but it also compels him to accept his various mechanisms of repression. In a conversation with Johnny Abbes after he loses the dictator's favour, Senator Cabral expresses the gravity of his predicament: "But, Colonel, seeking asylum, as if I were an enemy of the regime? I've been a part of the regime for thirty years" (Vargas Llosa 210). In the case of the puppet-president, Vargas Llosa characterizes him as a very ambivalent character. Even though he stands out for his apparent lack of ambition in the first half of the novel, Balaguer unveils his thirst for power after the death of Trujillo, confirming the suspicions of many fellow supporters of the

regime, who describe him as a "mysterious, inscrutable character" (Köllmann 294). One of Aunt Adelina's responses to Urania sheds light on the role not only of the intellectual class, but of everyone who belonged to Trujillo's inner circle of power: "Well, that's what politics is, you make your way over corpses" (201).

On the other hand, the seven men who plot against Trujillo, and finally murder him in Chapter XII, decide to rebel against the regime quite aware of the multiple perils of their mission. In fact, a substantial portion of the second half of the book allows the reader to witness the bloody persecution of Trujillo's killers by the remaining forces of the regime. Unlike the intellectuals, the conspirators are men of action, as they exercise their individual agency to put an end to the state of repression that has tormented the nation for more than thirty years. They all realise that "change is only possible by liberating the country from the despot" (Köllmann 280). According to Eduardo Hopkins Rodríguez, loyalty and treason comprise the two main elements of every political action and every historical process that is related to the development of power (140). In the world of Trujillo, loyalty correlates with a permanent state of subordination to the figure of the dictator. In turn, the tyrant manipulates a monopoly of treason inasmuch as he can transgress the principle of loyalty with his subjects (144). Therefore, in betraying their leader, the assassins are performing an act of justice:

> Ridding the country of that man was the main thing. When that obstacle was out of the way, even if things didn't go so well at first, at least a door would be opened. And that justified what they were doing tonight, even if none of them survived […] You had to eradicate the person in whom all the strands of the dread spiderweb converged. (131)

While there is no doubt that the magnicide of Trujillo constitutes a heroic deed in itself, the rationale behind the actions of its perpetrators did not originate from an ideological

or ethical opposition to the practices of the dictatorship. Rather, all of them have personal reasons to eliminate the 'Maximum Leader'. Self-disgust is a major motivation for their enterprise. The conspirators are ashamed of their participation in the regime and want to vindicate themselves: they have all experienced the same state of moral stagnation that has affected the whole nation and are now ready to act.

But, in most cases, revenge also accounts for their call to get rid of the tyrant: Amado García Guerrero was deceived into executing the brother of his former bride; Antonio de la Maza's brother was murdered and humiliated by Trujillo; and Antonio Imbert wants to avenge the murder of the Mirabal sisters. Only in the case of Salvador Estrella Sadhalá can the reader find a purely moral justification for the magnicide (Köllmann 283), as he gets the determination to kill Trujillo after he hears the advice of a priest who shows him a passage from Thomas Aquinas that says "God looks with favor upon the physical elimination of the Beast if a people is freed thereby" (Vargas Llosa 185). The optimism of the novel resides in the fact that, even in a social world such as the one the reader finds in Vargas Llosa's portrayal of Trujillo's Dominican Republic, there is room for moral behaviour. Even though the motivations behind the assassins' determination to kill the dictator are far from idealistic, their resolve to do so is presented as an ennobling act in itself.

2.4. The 'truth' about the *Era de Trujillo*

Even though history was the starting point for the novel, Vargas Llosa never intended to produce a literal, unadulterated representation of Dominican society during the Trujillo Era. Interestingly, as is the case with *Conversation in The Cathedral*, the proliferation of facts—either historical or fictional—that we find throughout the book is not negatively impacted by the lack of categorical assertions on the part of the narrator, who refrains from passing

judgement on the stories he shares with the readers. On the contrary: by and large, the novel's power of persuasion is reinforced by virtue of the darkening of certain elements of the narrative, a narrative technique that takes issue with the notion of a single, incontestable 'truth' about the dictatorship of the Generalissimo.

Beyond doubt, the tragic story of Urania Cabral is at the heart of *The Feast of the Goat*. In *Conversación en Princeton*, Vargas Llosa confesses that this female character—according to Efraín Kristal, the most complex of his production (2018 96)—imposed on him when he reached the conclusion that the worst victim of *trujillismo* were Dominican women (217). The characterization of Urania is that of an isolated, cold and uprooting woman who, like the planet Uranus, rotates in the opposite direction than the other planets (Boland 260). But this existential crisis has a very dark explanation: in a very similar way to the plot of Rómulo Gallegos's regionalist novel *Doña Bárbara* (1929), the central event is the rape of little Urania by Trujillo himself, which is only revealed to the reader towards the end of the book. The tragedy of this experience leads to her obsession with the years of the dictatorship, to the point that it is possible to draw a parallel between what Hedy Habra calls Urania's "perverse hobby" (115) and the work of Vargas Llosa as an explorer of authoritarian power (Köllmann 298):

> "My apartment in Manhattan is full of books," Urania continues […] Testimonies, essays, memoirs, lots of histories. Can you guess the period? The Trujillo Era, what else? […] I've become an expert on Trujillo. Instead of playing bridge or golf, or riding horses, or going to the opera, my hobby has been finding out what happened during those years. (46)

Having been given to Trujillo by her own father, Senator Agustín Cabral, in order to secure the pardon of the dictator, Urania becomes the victim of her progenitor and the man who claims to be 'the father of the fatherland' (Griffin 127). For many decades, Urania felt the overriding need to tell her story, which is why, according to Efraín Kristal, the scene in which she confesses what happened to her with her aunt, her cousins and her niece (who happen to represent three generations of Dominican women) is much more cathartic than the murder of the tyrant (2018 100), the historical fact from which Vargas Llosa departed to write the novel. In keeping with the irrevocable freedom Karl Popper attributes to the individual in *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1945), Vargas Llosa endows the main characters of the 2000 novel with free will. Indeed, in the context of an autocratic regime, it is no coincidence that the last verb of the novel alludes to the growing freedom Urania will have to make choices in her future (Griffin 127), which aligns with the liberation she has experienced in becoming the narrator of her own story: "If Marianita writes to me, I'll answer all her letters, she *decides*" (404; my italics). Though invented, the character of Urania Cabral is an emblem of all women (among them the Mirabal sisters) who suffered the terrible effects of the Trujillo regime. The lie of her case does not diminish the credibility of the historical 'truth' that she invokes through her story.

Within the tradition of the Latin American dictatorship novel, the originality of *The Feast of the Goat* resides in the way in which Vargas Llosa managed to show the most human side of Trujillo. In particular, sociologist Gonzalo Portocarrero argues that the despot's sexual impotence plays havoc with his god-like figure and gradually gives rise to a lack of faith in the myth of his absolute power (161) The use of sex as an instrument of power is quite common in the context of Latin America (and, more specifically, in Vargas Llosa's works of

fiction), where the reigning *macho* culture has denigrated female subjects for ages. In the 2000 novel, Trujillo is represented as a predator in the broader sense of the term. Indeed, it is no surprising that Griffin draws a parallel between Trujillo's abuse of Urania and his violation of the nation at large (118). Therefore, the impossibility of demonstrating his supremacy on a sexual level (i.e. getting an erection) emasculates the dictator and makes him whimper in front of 14-year-old Urania—whose ghost haunts him throughout the book—, as she tells her family in her confession:

> "He said there was no justice in this world. Why was this happening to him after he had fought so hard for this ungrateful country, these people without honor? He was talking to God. The saints. Our Lady. Or maybe the devil. He shouted and begged. Why was he given so many trials? […] He knew how to beat flesh-and-blood enemies. […] He seemed half crazed with despair. Now I know why. Because the prick that had broken so many cherries wouldn't stand up anymore. That's what made the titan cry. Laughable, isn't it?" (398)

In showing Trujillo at his most vulnerable, the fictional world created by Vargas Llosa turns the legend of the Goat that has been perpetuated in Dominican history into an object of ridicule within the repressive, misogynistic and phallocentric context of the totalitarian regime which serves as its social referent. Nevertheless, the novel also reminds readers that, given the right circumstances, anyone can behave like Trujillo, because, as extreme as his vices are, they are part of human nature (Köllmann 250). In an article he wrote the same year the novel was published, Vargas Llosa reflects on this recurring theme in his fiction:

> […] the worst thing is to […] discover that violence and excess are not alien to us, that they are full of humanity, that those avid monsters of transgression crouch in the most

> intimate part of our being, and that, from the shadows they inhabit, await an auspicious occasion to manifest themselves, to impose their laws of unrestrained behaviour, which would end rationality, coexistence and perhaps existence. ("Un mundo sin novelas" 43-44; my translation)

Trujillo and Urania's stories—as well as those of the conspirators—question ourselves as readers about how much we can truly know about the past and the so-called 'truth' that appears as incontrovertible in many historical accounts. While history (understood as a social science) assumes a position of deference with respect to factuality, literature is a *transgressive* form of art which operates under a 'poetic licence' in order to elaborate a narrative that, "while lying, expresses a curious truth" about the social world "which can only be expressed in concealment, disguised as something quite different from itself" (2002 5; my translation). In this sense, despite the fact that the historical novel "makes the historical events and issues crucial for the central characters […] and for the course of the narrative" (Abrams & Galt Harpham 256), it is always a fiction. Instead of conforming to life as it is, literature calls into question what is presented as an absolute truth and invites readers to approach the real world in a more critical way, as the Vargas Llosa of the sixties suggested in "The Literature is Fire" speech.

Following the precedent set by *Conversation in The Cathedral*, *The Feast of the Goat* represents the phenomenon of a Latin American dictatorship in a pluralistic, highly ambivalent manner, without any traces of didacticism or proselytism. Yet unlike its predecessor, the 2000 dictatorship novel allocates more importance to individual agency, and is thus suggestive of a more hopeful work of fiction.

CONCLUSIONS

I. The literary testimony constitutes, in and of itself, a valuable and necessary complement to that of the social sciences insofar as it accounts for elements of human experience to which sociologists and historians have no easy access. Vargas Llosa's theory of 'the truth of lies' underscores the idea that despite novels do not provide a literal representation of an epoch and its social issues, they are cultural artefacts that can reveal hidden truths or shed light on largely unexplored aspects of that social reality. As such, a careful analysis of literary texts can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of social phenomena in a given historical context.

II. Both in *Conversation in The Cathedral* and *The Feast of the Goat*, it is possible to identify the author's overriding impulse to explore the manifold ways in which a political phenomenon (namely, a totalitarian regime) affects a collectivity of individuals who often come from very dissimilar backgrounds, in areas of social experience that are seemingly unrelated to politics. Notably, the incorporation of nonpolitical elements allows the reader to gauge for themselves the extent to which the regime can penetrate the private sphere, and, by implication, to *feel* what it is like to live under the shadow of a dictatorship from various perspectives.

III. In his dictatorship novels, Vargas Llosa goes to great lengths to capture as much as possible of social experience during the regimes of Odría and Trujillo, in pursuance of his novelistic ideal of the 'total novel,' which derives from a tradition of novelists (among them, Joanot Martorell, Honoré de Balzac and Leon Tolstoy) who strived to create works of fiction as complex and unfathomable as the real world. The ambitiousness of this artistic project correlates with a narrative form—the poetics

followed by Vargas Llosa—which renders reading a labyrinthine activity, in consonance with the way in which an autocratic regime destabilizes and eventually distorts reality.

IV. As a result of this totalization of social experience, the fictional reality of these novels aspires to become an autonomous, self-contained world. The emancipation of the fictional world from its social referent produces a completely new gradation of meaning that compels us to study it in its own terms, rather than as a by-product of historical sources (the documentation Vargas Llosa utilized as the raw material to write his dictatorship novels). In this sense, the hypothesis of Marxist criticism that literature is a mimetic art—that is, that it functions as a 'social reflector' of the reality in question—is discredited by virtue of the freedom with which the author manipulates historical facts and makes them serviceable to his artistic goals.

V. On the other hand, the multi-dimensional quality of the novels often results in a largely ambivalent recreation of the referents they portray. Both Santiago Zavala and Urania Cabral have a lot of doubts regarding their own past and the past of their countries. The fact that these questions remain unanswered at the end of the novels is symptomatic of a social reality that is not easily discernible. Moreover, it aligns with a novelistic project that invites reflection on the most impenetrable aspects of the nations' history and refrains from rationalizing the experience of living under a dictatorship. It is this void that social scientists are expected to fill in.

VI. The human composition of *Conversation in The Cathedral* is much more diverse than that of *The Feast of the Goat*, a novel in which most of the main characters belong (or have belonged) to Trujillo's entourage. In that regard, the 2000 novel concentrates on

a group of individuals who have been closer to power and therefore witnessed its corrosive nature in a more direct manner, while the majority of the characters in Vargas Llosa's first dictatorship novel have a more distant relationship with the powerful and lead seemingly ordinary lives. Although the repressive nature of a dictatorship is highly detrimental to the societies depicted in both novels, the greater emphasis on individual agency (and, by extension, the moral responsibility to put an end to an autocratic system) in *The Feast of the Goat* could be attributed to the proximity to the power structure of the regime. This phenomenon needs to be further explored in order to make more conclusive assertions.

VII. *Conversation in The Cathedral* represents a closed world that lacks in alternatives and produces a generalized state of frustration and defeat. Conversely, despite the dictator's total control of the Dominican Republic in *The Feast of the Goat*, the tyrannicide is represented as a viable way to start the democratization of the nation. Therefore, while the topic of the individual's rebellion against absolute power is present in both works of fiction, the fact that it only bears fruit in the second one is suggestive of a more optimistic outlook in the author's world view.

VIII. Another key point of divergence between the two novels is that General Odría appears in a single line of the 1969 novel whereas Trujillo's presence is palpable in the whole plot of *The Feast of the Goat*. This decision contributes to a fuller appreciation of the figure of the Latin American dictator in the 2000 novel, inasmuch as the reader is not only able to understand the implications his cult of personality has for the masses and himself, but also to dismantle the fiction behind his supremacy. Coupled with the confession of Urania (which underscores the role of sex as an instrument of power),

the chapters in which the narrator gives us access to Trujillo's thoughts and feelings on the day he is murdered are particularly revelatory in this respect.

IX. Nevertheless, both novels converge in their portrayal of literature as an art that is particularly suitable for the manifestation of evil, a theory that was initially developed by Georges Bataille. In *Conversation in The Cathedral*, the character of Cayo Bermúdez (also known as "Cayo Shithead") incarnates the more sinister and cold-blooded elements of Odría's dictatorship. In a similar vein, the implied author of *The Feast of the Goat* represents Trujillo as the devil himself, and Johnny Abbes García as the servile head of security who perpetuates the power of his master by deploying a sophisticated machinery of torture and murder.

X. Following an exhaustive study of the texts, it transpires that in spite of Vargas Llosa's conversion from socialism to liberalism in the early 1970s, neither of the novels promotes any given ideology or political agenda. The multidimensional and ambivalent accounts of the dictatorships the reader finds in the books are in the antipodes of a political pamphlet that endorses a particular course of action in response to authoritarian regimes. Rather, according to Vargas Llosa's literary theory, novels are fundamental to instill a critical attitude in readers and to remind them of the many deficiencies of the world as it is. Crucially, in *Historia secreta de una novela*, the author elaborates on his discovery that novels are made of *obsessions* rather than convictions and, by implication, that irrationality is as important as rationality in the field of creative writing (19).

XI. The comparative analysis of these two dictatorship novels confirms the hypothesis that Vargas Llosa is a writer who has an overarching impulse to make sense of the world

that surrounds him, both in his fictional and non-fictional publications, and who has a predilection for the theme of absolute power. In fact, the recent publication of his novel *Hard Times* (*Tiempos recios*, Alfaguara, 2019) attests to his enduring interest in the topic of dictatorships. Situated in the years of the Cold War, this new work of fiction takes place in the Guatemala of the 1950s, when Carlos Castillo Armas orchestrated a *coup d'état* against the government of Jacobo Árbenz with the support of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), thereby becoming the 28th president of the country. Behind this operation there was the false accusation that Árbenz was a communist who collaborated with the Soviet Union—a significant precedent for what is now known as *fake news*—in order to benefit the transactions of the United Fruit Company. What is more, the novel shows the involvement of Rafael Leonidas Trujillo (who returns as a character together with Johnny Abbes García almost two decades after *The Feast the Goat*) in the assassination of Castillo Armas in 1957, a magnicide that was followed by numerous totalitarian regimes in the region. As some critics have highlighted, this reality compels readers to ask themselves about the precise moment in which Latin America "fucked itself up," broadening the scope of Zavalita' question in *Conversation in The Cathedral*. As is the case with *The Feast of the Goat*, one of the leading characters is a woman called Martita Borrero Parra (also known as 'Miss Guatemala') whose experiences provide valuable insights into the turbulent social world portrayed in the book. *Hard Times* revisits many of the social issues and literary techniques that are present in the two dictatorship novels Vargas Llosa wrote in 1969 and 2000, and thus evinces the author's unceasing commitment with the social reality of the highly contradictory region that is Latin America.

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