Mario Vargas Llosa's Conversacion en la Catedral: A Paradigm of Corruption

Adelaida Lucero, University of the Philippines Diliman, Philippines

The Asian Conference on Literature & Librarianship 2014
Official Conference Proceedings 2014

0216

Abstract

"At what precise moment had Peru fucked itself up?" exasperatingly asks *Conversation in the Cathedral*, the highly acclaimed novel of Mario Vargas Llosa, "one of the finest novelists of twentieth century Spanish America," and the 2010 Nobel Laureate. Although the question remains unanswered in the novel, it pervades each facet of life in Peru under military regimes (1948-63), especially the *Ochenio Odrista* (1948-56),3 like a driving force investigating everyone and everything in this paradigm of Latin American corruption, and tracking each aspect of Peruvian reality (and metaphorically, of Latin American reality) to its extreme failure and ruin. The book becomes not only an immense mural of Peruvian life (and the Latin American situation) but also a fierce denunciation of the corruption and immorality engulfing different strata of society, under a dictatorship and its instruments of entrenching itself in power.

As Santiago Zavala, a rich businessman's son, and Ambrosio Pardo, the Zavalas' Negro chauffeur, converse and reproduce fifteen years of misery under military rules, especially the "Ochenia," over rounds of beer at the Cathedral (a cheap bar-brothel), *Conversation* reels off a cinematic story of violence and militarism, greed and corruption, deceit and betrayal, oppression and perversion, racial discrimination and class conflict. The reader-pieced reminiscences also provide an encompassing portrayal of Peruvian life in the vast variety of its geographic locations, of its real life-drawn characters, and of its societal conditions. And their reflections' focus on the Odria dictatorship affords incisive investigation into its debasing socio-political system, as well as a most scathing indictment of these networks that have caused Peru's (and similarly-situated Latin American and Third World countries) brutalization and nurtured the agents of such brutalization.

Thus, Vargas Llosa's ultra-complex structure and desacralized language eloquently denounce the Peruvian social truth he re-creates, and affirm his creative genius.

"At what precise moment had Peru fucked itself up?" exasperatingly asks *Conversation in the Cathedral*,[1] the highly acclaimed novel of Mario Vargas Llosa, Nobel laureate and "one of the finest novelists of twentieth century Spanish America."[2] Although the question remains unanswered in the novel, it pervades each facet of life in Peru under military regimes (1948-63), especially the *Ochenio Odrista* (1948-56),[3] much like a driving force investigating everyone and everything in this paradigm of Latin American corruption, and tracking each aspect of Peruvian reality (and metaphorically of Latin American reality) to its extreme failure and ruin.

The book, however, becomes not only an immense mural of Peruvian life (and the Latin American situation) but also a fierce denunciation of the corruption and immorality engulfing different strata of society, as a consequence of a dictatorial regime and the instruments it has utilized to entrench itself in power.

A Mural and a Denunciation of the Latin American Situation

As Santiago Zavala, the estranged son of a very rich and famous businessperson, and Ambrosio Pardo, a brutish Negro who used to be the Zavalas' chauffeur, converse and reproduce fifteen years of misery under military rule, especially the

---

[1] Mario Vargas Llosa, *Conversation in the Cathedral*, Gregory Rabassa, tr. fr. Spanish. 1974 (New York: Harper and Row), p. 3. All quotations from the novel are from this edition.

[2] Kessel Schwartz, 1971, *A New History of Spanish American Fiction* (New York),
p. 325.

[3] The "Ochenio" refers to the eight years that Odria's rule lasted.

"Ochenia," over rounds of beer at the Cathedral (a cheap bar-brothel, not the seat of the Roman Catholic archdiocese, as the title ironically suggests), *Conversacion* reels off a cinematic story of violence and militarism, greed and corruption, deceit and betrayal, oppression and perversion, racial discrimination and class conflict.

The reader-pieced reminiscences also provide a meticulous and encompassing portrayal of Peruvian life in the vast variety of its geographic locations (from large cities to small towns); of its real life-drawn characters (from political and business elites, to university students and *pequeno burgues*, to servants and prostitutes); and of its societal conditions (from wealth down to squalor, including racism and class conflict). The focus of their reflections on the Odria dictatorship affords incisive investigation into its debasing sociopolitical system, as well as a most scathing indictment of these networks that have caused Peru's (and similarly-situated Latin American and Third World countries') brutalization, and that have nurtured the agents of such brutalization.

The most unedifying vision of Peru may be reduced to a triadic problem of oppressive political repression or militarism, divisive racial and social conflicts, and perverted moral decadence.

Political Repression

One of the main characters, Cayo Bermudez, affords a most penetrating insight into the Peruvian political system as he enacts the militarism, with its unabated deceit, abuse, and repression, by which the Odrias keep their stranglehold on their helpless countries. Although he rises from an unknown *cholo* ("half-breed") in the provincial Chincha to head the government's police and intelligence network through the recommendation of an old friend (Gen. Espina, then minister of Interior), Cayo Bermudez, through animal cunning and guts, becomes the formidable right hand man of Odria. Operating by the dictum that everyone has a price ("I am only bothered for nothing by the government" (p. 265), he maximizes the use of or blackmail that leaves one no choice; or, if still unsuccessful, betrayal or unspeakable terrorism and violence, although he is ever careful to project and publicize an image of government lawfulness and stability.

As Bermudez personally takes charge of the fiercely repressive government police and all matters pertinent to security and public order, the reader is initiated into the most wily tactics deployed in order to: eliminate political rebels (the way pseudo-Aprista Trinidad is beaten to death by the police); silence the media (the way newspaper publisher Tallio is reprimanded, his editor fired, his permit almost cancelled, and his fee doubled); intimidate and punish activists, reformists, or suspected communists (the way the students are jailed and anti-Odria suspects tortured); muzzle universities (the way the University of San Marcos is planted with informers and arms caches, occupied by the military, and later shut down); paralyze union strikes or break up opposition rallies, and especially crush any

conspiracy cooking in the higher echelons of government; in short, perpetuate the dictatorship and its trusted coterie.

Or he may hurt the civilians' businesses by withdrawing their contracts or imposing heavy taxes and penalties. Although himself a benefactor of the "padrino system" of compensations (having been recommended to his post by Espina, and having been helped in winning his wife by Ambrosio and Espina), he has no qualms about using or misusing friends, or engaging in any number of betrayals and counterbetrayals in order to foster the dictatorship and his vested interests which are well-aligned with it.

If any instance of repression, not suavely carried out, leaks out and elicits negative releases from the United Press, Agence-France, Associated Press, and other uncensorable presses abroad, or draws image-tarnishing reactions from embassies especially the United States, Bermudez belies the dispatches and makes his communiqués that deny those allegations prevail. Hence, Bermudez himself orders the release of the coup plotters he has had arrested and made incommunicado (after blackmailing them into silence about the coup and loyalty to the Odria government), in order to show to the rest of the world that no militarist methods are employed by Odria; that the government has no political prisoners and real enemies; and that there has been no anti-Odria coup d'etat plot at all. Hence, coup plotter Espina is "rewarded" an ambassadorship to Spain, just as coup financier Senator Landa is promised the Senate presidency, and their jailed friends, freed.

To prove to other countries, especially the United States (from which credits are being mulled), that the Odria government has the popular mandate, and to demonstrate the stability of his (Odria) rule, Bermudez calls for elections, the most acceptable proof of popular support and democratic space. Although allegedly a mere formality, the elections have to be rigged and Bermudez has to orchestrate manifold forms of election shenanigans (from ballot snatching, to jailing of opposition candidates, to terrorism and violence) in order to ensure an Odria win. As usual, the rule of silence, with the aid of bribery and blackmail, holds sway.

Thus, Cayo Bermudez, Cayo shithead to his detractors, becomes the architect if not the epitome of the Odrist politics of pricing everyone and everything; of appointments, re-appointments, and promotions; of government contracts and permits; of bribery, blackmail, and betrayal; of repression and terrorism. From a Latin American perspective, he is the modern-day embodiment of the feudalistic machismo; his politics, "the essence of machismo: the conquering hero, the military dictatorship."[5] And to Vargas Llosa, machismo is one of those feudal structures brutalizing Latin American societies, which, when unchecked, obstructs any improvement, and instead, perpetuates violence and repression. Through this compleat militarist and his machismo dictatorship, Vargas Llosa protests the

---

[5] Penny Lernoux, "The Latin American Disease," *Nation* (November 22, 1975), p. 527.

corruption and strong-arm machinations of the political system, especially its acquisition and retention of power by nefarious and violent means.

Social Divide

The reprehensible racial and social gulfs fragmenting and stultifying Peru, and the concomitant racial and social conflicts, are enacted by the *Conversaion* characters, particularly the axis characters Ambrosio, Santiago, and Cayo Bermudez. Being a poor Negro, Ambrosio feels most acutely how it is to belong to the base of the racial-social pyramid and suffer the complexes generated by race and social station. Not only does he have to be at the beck and call of his employer any time of the day or night, any number of hours per day -- he has to put up with being derided as a mere servant, or being snubbed each day by his own childhood playmate-turned political despot. He has to bear the sneers and snide remarks of members of other social groups when he attempts to do what non-blacks do (the way he is contemptuously treated at a brothel house that finds a Negro an unthinkable customer, or the way he is rebuffed for aspiring to date a prized bar girl.)

In contrast, the fair complexion; the allegedly superior origins, culture, and lifestyle; and the money of the rich Creoles (Europeans born in the New World) called *blancos* (whites) and of their descendants, have wrought the upper crust demarcation lines separating them from the non-whites and non-rich, and have instilled inferiority complexes among the latter.

It is evident in Don Fermin's condescension towards San Marcos University as a *choleria* ("nest of half-breeds" (p. 255) and in his looking down on big time business gringos as "half savages" in dire need of Carreno's book of etiquette (p. 258) and on Cayo Bermudez as a *cholo de mierde* ("shitty half-breed"). It is further noted in the Zavalas' non-acceptance of Santiago's *chola* wife into their elite family, and in Dona Zoila's dismissing her as *huachafa* (trash).

On the other hand, the non-whites' feeling of inferiority towards the upper class is seen in their white fantasies and in their envy of the rich and white. Hence, having a fair-skinned child makes the likes of the Vulture (Cayo's father) "get puffed up and saw to it that his son always wore shoes and didn't mix up with black people. Hence, Queta may actually be a mulatta ("half –caste") although she fancies herself to be white and looks down on Ambrosio for being black.

Even if Cayo Bermudez may have been catapulted to heights of power and affluence, yet he feels miserably inadequate and unaccepted among Lima's rich whites, especially beside Don Fermin, whose every movement spelled awesome "breeding and money" (p. 198). For in Lima, he remains every inch a *cholo*, secretly envious of the whites and seeking whiteness for himself.

If Miraflores or everything that this millionaire's row stands for is the envy of the non-whites and non-rich, the Zavala scion, Santiago, finds it artificial, prejudged,

and revolting. He is bothered by the unjust privileges bestowed on the upper class, and irked by this class' social hypocrites and abuses.

He is also irritated by his own family's suffocating lifestyle: their preoccupation with proprieties and social image (of refinement, success, and affluence); their interference in his schooling (regarding the respectability of his school, course, and classmates), in his creative interests (including the privacy of his poetry as well as the poetry of his privacy), in his choice of friends (objecting to his association with half-breeds and communists), and in his curricular activities (forbidding political and revolutionary involvement); his father and his friends' vested capitalist politicking and "connections" mentality; his mother's social snobbishness and repulsion over the miseries of the poor and downtrodden.

Hence, Santiago turns his back against luxuries of upper class life, cuts off family bonds, and seeks a more meaningful life on his own. He continues crossing the racial-social lines he had started traversing as a student of San Marcos where he mixed with half-breeds and activists. His break with rich bourgeois life and with his family is complete when he marries a *chola* not at all acceptable to the Zavalas, lives a life of mediocrity with her on elf houses row, and refuses any assistance, even any inheritance from his family.

Thus, as Cayo Bermudez rises from a struggling provincial businessperson to national politics, and unsuccessfully aspires to transcend his *cholo* origins in order to become a white; as Santiago Zavala spurns his upper class lifestyle to embrace "cholodom" and *pequeno burgues* life only to end up a big failure; as black Ambrosio Pardo depravedly panders to the rich and powerful as driver of Don Cayo and later of Don Fermin, or bears the misfortunes and depravities of fellow proletariats; and as other characters, representing the elite *blancos*, the cholo, or the working classes echo them in varying degrees and intensities, the multiple conflicts and barriers of class and color gnawing at Peruvian society are strikingly enacted and criticized.

Moral Decadence

On top of but closely interlocked with the themes of political repression-oppression and racial-social class antagonism and struggles, the theme of moral corruption is seen plaguing not only the rich and powerful but all levels of the social structure, corroding not only the mighty political brokers and militarists but the heart of Peru's various social institutions.

As earlier noted, the government, with its politics of militarism and graft for perpetuating power and amassing wealth, is heavily censured in the novel, especially when the encompassing effects of such abuse on the land and the people are considered. The church and its priests are also indirectly criticized for the ineffectuality of "so much religion" to stem the tide of moral decay and for being a part of it, "getting its slice of meat from the whole business" (pp. 49, 73, 435, and

481). Even the feudalistic code of machismo gets rapped for having bred violence and sexual permissiveness into the Latin American male from infancy. The educational system is also sunk in ineptitude, with its decrepit professors and facilities, apathetic or undisciplined students, and its lack of academic freedom (p. 90). That there is "no shortage" of whorehouses, beer bars, gambling dens and shacking joints, in both urban and rural areas (p. 465) wraps up the moral decadence engulfing Peruvian social life.

This moral deterioration permeating all social levels and classes is also seen in the compound of graft, social exploitation, and sexual laxity that almost everyone has made a way of life in Peru. Mention has been made of Cayo Bermudez' politics of bribery, blackmail, and terrorism to obtain what he desired in the name of "security reasons."

Worse, however, is the effect this bad example has made in wrecking the rank and file's view of public service, especially because it has become institutionalized in the force, if not in the government.

But worst, his corruption is reflected in his pervert sexual indulgence and its related exploitation of other people. He splurges on prostitutes and hostesses of classy nightclubs and brothels where he unwinds often. His continual adulterous fantasies of white elite matrons are interspersed in his political activities.

Other "gentle decente," while maintaining facades of decency and honesty, have become avid practitioners of graft, exploitation, and immorality. Don Fermin, awesomely respected gentlemen and honest industrialist to most people, plays both the games of envelopes (i.e., bribery for business contracts) and political connections very subtly yet effectively, and also leads the double life of model husband-father and "fawning homosexual in "randy brothel circles" and in Ancon with his chauffeur-"pratboy" Ambrosio. Dr. Ferro's malversation of public funds and his involvement with a scandalously immoral mistress; Sen. Arevalo's campaign goons and sexual obsessions; everyone's condonation of drugs -- all disclose instances of the elite's twin brutalization in material corruption and sexual depravity.

Three Responses: Self-aggrandizement, Debasement, or Disillusionment

To his composite picture of corrupted Peruvian life, Vargas Llosa demonstrates three main responses, represented by Bermudez's, Ambrosio's, and Santiago's reactions, which, far from alleviating the national despoliation, have only served to exacerbate the situation.

Tasting formidable power and yet deeply aware of its vagaries, Bermudez makes the most of his position, the favorable political climate, and Odria's ample trust in him, to take in and stealthily stash away as much wealth as he can abroad, in order

to guarantee his future when his political clout should wane. His course of action represents that of self-servers who, by position, wealth, and cunning, can survive all disasters no matter the cost to others (especially to the small fry) or to their own respectability. These include the elite in government and business, like Don Fermin, Sen. Landa, Dr. Ferro, Gen. Espina, Sen. Arevalo, Odria himself, later government heads like Haya, Prado, and Belaunde, and following in their father's footsteps, Sparky and Popeye. Although they have different political beliefs, varying degrees of power, or dissimilar survival tricks, theirs are similar stories of self-aggrandizement, political connections, and capitulations. Whatever happens, they remain rich, corrupt, and generally unhurt.

The Ambrosios of the lower class, however, can only accept the bestiality of their "dog-eat-dog" world, swim with the tide of its corruption and degeneration, and end up bruised, if nor ruined (p. 15). For his story, begun in sincere hard work, becomes one of subservience to the upper class bosses (whose lifestyle and affluence he covets), with its concomitant debasement (here, sexual debasement); imitation of their moral lifestyle; murder for loyalty; the consequent fugitive jungle life at the expense of his "family." Not only has society circumscribed him/ and other Ambrosios to lowly social and work positions; it has denied him/them opportunities for growth, even forced him/them into corruption for survival.

The most striking reaction to the national sterility is the disillusioned Santiago Zavala's. The youthful and "pure" Santiago, called Superbrain at home, may have been the pride of his father for his scholastic brilliance and promising capabilities, but his uneasiness about his family, as well as the upper class affluence and power in a society where the majority are abjectly poor and down-trodden, makes him reject the route parallel to his father's success and wealth story. In revulsion of his class values, he enrolls not at the Catholic University his parents wanted, but at San Marcos where he not only mixes with half-breeds but also engages in leftist activities. Arrested and jailed for political activities to which he was not wholeheartedly committed, and given an ultimatum to toe the line by his own embarrassed father who had to bail him out, his idealism is crushed. Rejecting what the national power and his own class and family represent, he leaves his family and upper class future in order to eke out a living on his own. His marriage to a *chola*, with its lack of faith and commitment, adds to the frustration that Zavalita's life has become.

Such odyssey in utter ruin, however, is intensely conveyed by his own figurative description:

> 'Piling up shit with a great deal of enthusiasm, a small pile today, a little more tomorrow, a fair amount day after tomorrow . . . Until there was a whole mountain of shit. And now to eat it, down to the last crumb. That's what happened to me . . . (p. 344)

As he moves from a marginalized rebel against his class, capitalism and Odrist politics, to a disenchanted political activist, then to a directionless petty bourgeois mired in debts and stagnation, therefore, Santiago becomes "Vargas Llosa's most personal and recriminatory symbol of Peru to date."[9] He also represents the disillusioned Latin American intellectual become an outsider, maimed and silenced, "hopelessly trapped between the chaos of the present and the emptiness of the future."[10]

Through Cayo Bermudez's, Ambrosio's, and Santiago's representative responses to the societal situation then, Vargas Llosa fiercely protests against how alienating, destructive, and paralyzing life under sociopolitical oppression and moral decay becomes. With his virtuoso writing technique, this powerful commentary of Peruvian (and Latin American) reality is brought home with greater viciousness and efficacy.

The Narrative Challenge: A Montage or Collage of Dialogs

Considered his greatest narrative challenge, *Conversation in the Cathedral* is a "most fully cinematic" masterpiece of montage (critic Emir R. Monegal calls it a "diachronic collage of dialogs"), whose esthetic concept -- what Ronald Christ refers to as "artful simultaneously" -- embodies the novel's sociopolitical and moral meaning. In the absence of a criticism that is cinematic, however, this discussion of Vargas Llosa's narrative technique uses as guide Ronald Christ's essay, "Novel Form, Novel Sense," which explores the elements of cinematic montage in relation to the novel's narrative method.[12]

"Whether you are considering the complexly multiple points of view which fragments Parts I and III or the fragments complexly multiplying the points of view in Parts II and IV," Christ explains, "the basic unit of *conversation* is a 'brick' of relatively flat prose describing or narrating through dialog, the political, social or personal events . . ."[13] These big or small chunks of naturalistic narrative or descriptive photo-fragments, however, do not simply present a deterministic picture of Peru, but are organized into such various patterns of juxtaposition (of linking or collision) or montage that they acquire multiple effects and meanings. A passage from the novel illustrates the point:

> . . . a red-faced gentleman shouted one day you've got to lend me your siren for a weekend at Paracas, will

---

[9] Philip Christ, "Vargas Llosa's *Conversacion en la Catedral*: A Study of Frustration and Failure in Peru," *Symposium* (Fall 1976), p. 211.

[10] *Ibid*., p. 212.

[12] In *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, IX, pp. 542-544.

[13] *Ibid*., p. 542.

> you, Don Cayo? And the master she's yours, General, and the mistress all set, take me to Paracas, I'm yours. Carlota and Amalia were dying with laughter listening to the jokes and watching the horsing around, but Simula wouldn't let them spy for very long, she would come into the pantry and close the door, or the mistress would appear, eyes glowing, cheeks flushed, and send them off to bed . . . (pp. 215-216)

The defiance of punctuation and mechanics rules affords a joining of words and actions; or speech, narration, and description; of point of view and points of view. Lacking any terminal sign, the syntax slides on commas just as the dialog flows on without any quotes. When a period finally occurs between what the grammarians would deplore as run-on sentences, the terminal mark signifies not a break but a juxtaposition of two contrasting groups and behavior: the immoral guests "horsing around" in the sala and the thrilled naïve maids peeping from the pantry and being sent off to sleep. As each unit, phrase, clause, or sentence constituting a "brick" in this simple descriptive narrative passage is linked with the others through montage, it becomes pregnant with literary effects and nuances.

Artful Simultaneity

In other words, simultaneity and coexistence in Vargas Llosa arise not just from their natural or logical relationship but mainly from his manner of putting diverse elements together -- such as different snippets of conversation culled from different characters, from different time frames, and different situations -- to create an artful simultaneity loaded with meanings and effects created by the "co-incidence" (i.e., coincidence only in the text) of disparate elements. By way of illustration, this dialog sequence may be examined for what it gains from "coincidence":

> (A) 'Nobody can get along with you', Don Fermin said. 'Even if we treat you with love, you always give us a kick in the pants.'
> (B) 'The fact is I am a little crazy,' Santiago said. 'Aren't you afraid to be with me?'
> (C) 'All right, don't cry, get off your knees, I believe you did it for me,' Don Fermin said, 'Didn't you think that instead of helping me you could have sunk me forever?. . .

Intercalating these dialogs telescopes three different situations and timescapes, highlighting three different relationships central to the novel of failure and ruin:

> (1) the love of a father for an unappreciative, rebellious son (or between Don Fermin and Santiago);

(2) the attraction of a university student to an intelligent leftist girl so different from Miraflores' socialites (or between Santiago and Aida); and
(3) the loyalty of a chauffeur "pratboy" to a master (or between Ambrosio and Don Fermin).

It also contrasts three stereotype characters created by social situations:

(1) paternal love and authority asserting and reinforcing a chain of dependence;
(2) a young man declaring his individuality and love in defiance of family and class values; and
(3) the opposite of such assertive personalities, a servant's blind and debased loyalty to his master.

Moreover, one block of dialog relates backward or forward upon the others, just as the corresponding time block impinges back and forth upon the others, thereby dramatizing the changing nature of meaning with respect to the relationship of past, less immediate past, and present. Again, since the text cannot properly state the synthesis of the collaged elements, it is the reader who reflects (on the diverse collaged views and on the varied landscape and timescape) -- simultaneously, diachronically, comparatively, and critically.

The montage technique not only affords comparison or contrast of characters and scenes; of exterior and interior qualities; of past and present; of voices and their echoes; of diverse points of view; of the main thread of conversation. between Santiago and Ambrosio and the less major ones between Santiago and Carlitos, and between Don Fermin and Ambrosio. Montage also forms the composite picture of a decadent, divided, and disintegrated society where individuals "work, live, plot, love, die, murder, and survive simultaneously, but not collectively, heroically."[16]

Verbal Violence

Moreover, Vargas Llosa complements his polyphony of voices, his contrapuntal views, his multidimensional landscape and timescape with a verbal violence that most efficaciously conveys

(1) his vision of a rueful and suffocating state of contemporary Peru; and
(2) his anguish and bitterness about this frustrating reality.

His frank and often coarse language rips apart any linguistic or social masks in order to expose the ugly truth of that reality and to exterminate the lies being peddled to deodorize its stench. Hence, he minces no words in raking up the filth of Lima's alleys, with its

. . . puddles of putrid water, the cloud of flies, and

---

[16] *Ibid.*

skinny dogs . . . (p. 276)

or the dehumanization of the dregs of humanity there, as they

> . . . insulted each other, pushed and punched . . . or, stretched out beside the walls, . . . sleeping, dirty, barefoot, open-mouthed, brutalized by boredom, hunger, or heat . . . (p. 114)

Hence, he whips up gross metaphors such as:

> . . . San Marcos was a brothel and not a paradise . . . (p. 90) (to refer to the state of miseducation the university was in),

and:

> . . . piling up shit . . . Until there was a whole mountain of shit. And now to eat it, down to the last crumb . . .(p. 344) (to speak of Santiago's retrogression)

or turns bits of description or comment into masterly strokes of irony, like Martinez's:

> 'One thing there's no shortage of anywhere are whorehouses and churches' (p. 435)

Or else, he can link the most inane or the most innocuous detail to the nation's state of ruin, such as:

> Even the rain was screwed-up in this country . . . (p. 6)

or:

> . . . a run-down shit-colored adobe wall -- the color of Lima . . . the color of Peru . . . (p. 8)

But perhaps the most jolting example of his brutally frank language, shorn of any hypocrisies, yet often reinforced with elsewhere-unprintable four-letter words, is found right on the first page of the novel echoed in the subsequent pages, welcoming the reader with its baptism of linguistic fire:

> At what precise moment had Peru fucked itself up? . . . He was like Peru . . . he'd fucked himself up somewhere along the line . . . Peru all fucked up, Carlitos all fucked up, everybody all fucked up . . . (p. 1)

By means of his ultra-complex structure and desacralized language, then, Mario Vargas Llosa has created a rich fictional world conveying the Peruvian social truth he denounces, more eloquently than does Peruvian reality itself. He affirms, once again, the creative genius of the Third World writer harnessed to denounce and avenge the irreparable destruction that repressive regimes and unjust social structures have wrought, especially in his beloved Peru. #

WORKS CITED

Alba, Victor. 1969. *The Latin Americans*. New York: Frederick A. Prager.

Brown, James. N.d. "Expatriate Syndrome: Mario Vargas Llosa on Peruvian Racism." *Essays on Literature*. 131-39.

Christ, Ronald. "Novel Form, Novel Sense." *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, IX. 542-44.

Johnson, Philip. Fall 1975. "Conversacion en la Catedral: A Study of Frustration and Failure in Peru." *Symposium*, 30: 3. 203-12.

Kirk, John M. In "Conversation in the Cathedral." *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, IX. 545-50.

Lane, Helen. June 1, 1964. "Last Rites for a Fat Cat." *The Nation*, 198: 23. 558-60.

Lernoux, Penny. November 22, 1975. "The Latin American Disease." *The Nation*. 522-27.

Levine, Suzanne. March 23, 1975. "Conversation in the Cathedral: A Massive Novel of Peruvian Realities." *The New York Times Book Review*. 15-100.

Llosa, Mario Vargas. 1974. Conversation in the Cathedral. Tr. Gregory Rabassa. New York: Harper and Row.

_____. 1970. "The Latin American Novel Today." *Books Abroad*, 44: 1. 1-45.

_____. March 16, 1977. "Social Commitment and the Latin American Writer." *World Literature Today*. 6-14.

Schwartz, Kessel. 1977. *A New History of Spanish American Fiction*. New York.