

Authoritarianism, Rebellion, and the Father Figure in the Fictions of Vargas Llosa

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It is not easy to know where novelists get their topics. Nor is it easy to understand why certain problems and experiences stimulate creation, while other similar events leave no imprint in an author's works. Some writers dismiss these questions and rarely address their creative process. It would seem that discovering the sources of their topics or obsessions, or the reason why they, like many others, have dedicated their lives to the creation of characters made up of words and set in worlds of their imagination, does not hold any interest for them.

This is not the case of Mario Vargas Llosa. On many occasions, the Peruvian novelist has addressed the issue of what events are incorporated into the process of writing. He has even described it as a "reverse striptease," in which authors, instead of revealing their hidden beauties, exhibit "the demons that plague and obsess them; the ugliest part of themselves, their nostalgia, guilt, and rancor" (*Historia secreta de una novela* 11).¹ Vargas Llosa has also revealed the personal experiences that have become the raw material of his fictions. These experiences share something in common. They contradicted views he had previously held about reality. For instance, the years he spent at the Leoncio Prado Military School, an institution that had students from all of Peru's geographical regions and social classes, permitted the young Vargas Llosa to get to know the deep social and racial tensions that conditioned life in his country. His trip to the Peruvian Amazon, which took place just before he began his graduate studies in Spain in 1958, brought him face to face with a Peru he had not previously known: an archaic, irrational, and savage country, in which life was not governed by modern institutions, but instead by violence.

Although these two experiences have been used by Vargas Llosa in several novels, the event that left the deepest impression

in his psyche and that has influenced his literature the most was the encounter with his father. This encounter is told in detail in his *El pez en el agua* (*A Fish in the Water*, 1994), the book of memoirs published in 1993.² Until he was ten, Vargas Llosa had believed his father, Ernesto J. Vargas, a Panagra Airlines radio operator, to be dead. However, in reality, his father had separated from his mother when she was five months pregnant and had not communicated with her for ten years. Vargas Llosa had been born in Arequipa and raised by his mother's side of the family. Afterwards, they had moved to Cochabamba, Bolivia, and finally to Piura in northern Peru. He had lived in a majority female environment, pampered and fêted as the only child, until one morning in 1946 or 1947, Ernesto J. Vargas intruded into his life.

His father was alive and had returned to take him and his mother back to Lima. He had to abandon his Edenic childhood, full of affection and care, and come to a city he did not know and face a father who soon showed himself to be authoritarian and violent. This would be the most disconcerting experience of his life. Like his time at the Leoncio Prado, or his visit to Amazonia, his relationship with Ernesto J. Vargas showed him that reality was different from what he had imagined.

A Fish in the Water is divided into two sets of chapters. In the uneven chapters, Vargas Llosa narrates the events that take place from the moment his father wrenches him from his childhood paradise: the moments of reclusion and terror he lived as a child, his time at Leoncio Prado and the University of San Marcos, and the beginnings of his literary vocation. In the even chapters, Vargas Llosa jumps forward to 1987 to narrate his experience as candidate for the presidential elections of 1990. He also analyzes the illusions, hopes, betrayals, and petty miseries that make up political life in Peru. It would seem these are two distinct topics—the youth of a future writer and his later decision to enter politics—but, in reality, they are both explorations of the central “demon” of Vargas Llosa's life: authoritarianism and its corollary, rebellion.

Vargas Llosa's personal and public life have both been scarred by the experience of authoritarianism. The father, whom the

child Vargas Llosa met when he was ten years old, was a violent, neurotic, and despotic man, unable to enjoy life. From the start of their relationship, he attempted to frustrate the literary interests of his son. And the rival and winning candidate for the elections of 1990, Alberto Fujimori, was a democratic president for only twenty months before he decided to close Congress, the Courts, the Constitutional Tribunal, and the Superior Judicial Council, in order to lead an unusual coup against the state and govern by decree. Like Ernesto J. Vargas, Fujimori showed himself to be an authoritarian man, hostile towards democratic institutions.

As a child, when, thanks to his father, he had to face privation, caprices, and even violence, Vargas Llosa developed a strong hatred for despotic personalities. This antipathy was reaffirmed years later, when he became aware that the hierarchical regime he had suffered at home was replicated in his country's public sphere. Peru has a long tradition of authoritarianism. Throughout its republican history, there have been numerous authoritarian governments. In fact, during the twentieth century there were almost four decades of non-democratic governments. "Military dictatorships are as common to Lima as bullfights. Peruvians of my generation have lived under them for more years than under democracy," wrote Vargas Llosa in 1983 (*The Country of a Thousand Faces* 8). The democratic governments of the last century were threatened by military coups, temporary presidencies, and populism. The result was the weakening of institutions caused by the eruption of caudillos and strongmen, whether they be farcical or subtle.

Authoritarianism has cast its long shadow on Vargas Llosa's private and public life. His father, an imperious man who ruled the home, was a version of the dictator, the prototypical despot who controlled all state institutions. In a passage from *A Fish in the Water*, Vargas Llosa establishes this connection between private and political spheres: "In October 1948, the military coup of General Odría brought down the democratic government and Uncle José Luis went into exile. My father celebrated the coup as a personal victory: the Llosas could no longer boast of having a relative who

was the president of Peru” (67). In Vargas Llosa’s mind, the father became associated with the figure of the dictator.

The father and the dictator are at the root of both this youthful drama and the problems of Peru. He who exercises limitless power, without restriction or mediation, corrupts both family and public institutions. Rebellion is the logical answer to this abuse of power. Vargas Llosa discovered that literature was a weapon in the struggle against oppression. First, he used it against his father, later against dictators. Alonso Cueto explains this well: “The literary vocation is not only an act of rebellion against paternal authority but even against the authority of reality itself” (12). From that moment on, Vargas Llosa realizes that nothing can annoy Ernesto J. Vargas more than his vocation for poetry. What had, until then, been a pastime becomes a vocation. Far from dissuading him, his father’s anger kindles his interest in literature. As he reminisces in *A Fish in the Water*: “To write poems was another of the secret ways of resisting my father, since I knew how much it irritated him that I wrote verses, something he associated with eccentricity, bohemia and what could horrify him most: being queer” (66).

Vargas Llosa’s interest in literature was the reason why his father decided to enroll him in the Leoncio Prado Military School. In Lima’s *machista* society of the 1950s, military discipline was considered as the antidote to any purported character weakness. Ernesto J. Vargas believed that the military could erase from the young Vargas Llosa’s mind his whim for literature and, in the process, transform him into a “real” man. The young aspiring writer saw himself immersed in a hostile environment. However, his father’s action had the opposite effect. Instead of repressing his son’s literary vocation, the Leoncio Prado School nourished his rebellion and his passion for literature. Furthermore, it gave him the raw material he used to write his first novel, *La ciudad y los perros* (*The Time of the Hero*, 1966).

Winner of the Seix Barral Biblioteca Breve Award in 1962 and published in 1963, *The Time of the Hero* is not only a complex literary work, but also an act of rebellion against his father, against the Leoncio Prado School, and against Lima’s society. Moreover, Vargas Llosa’s first novel is an act of revenge against an imperfect

reality that shows all its defects and perverse mechanics. This moral X-ray of Lima's society shows what happens when, instead of teaching virtue, educational institutions reproduce the vices found in private society. From its opening lines, we know that there is no space for moral considerations within the Leoncio Prado School. Alberto Fernández, one of the novel's main characters, is discovered far from his guard post. He knows this could lead to a serious sanction, and he develops a strategy to avoid punishment. Instead of trying to escape, he approaches a lieutenant and addresses him: "I'd like to ask you for some . . . moral advice" (16). The lieutenant's answer reflects the true nature of the Leoncio Prado School: "I'm not a priest, goddamn it! Go take your moral questions to your father or mother" (17).³ The remainder of the novel shows what happens when moral questions are banished from educational institutions.

Many of the young boys who board at the Leoncio Prado do not come there to be educated, but to have the military "shape them up" morally. Their parents have detected some suspicious moral trait, and they expect the military to correct any deviation in character from their imaginary version of masculinity. The contradiction arises in that the boys have come to an institution that, instead of being characterized by discipline and order, is governed by the law of the jungle, where the strongest determine rules and privileges. The survival of the cadets depends on their ability to violate the rule book and commit all types of infractions and outrages, from leaving the school without authorization, to smoking, drinking, and betting, to even stealing exams and engaging in bestiality with chickens. At the Leoncio Prado, lying is a way of life. While it presents itself to the outside world as an institution that inculcates discipline and honor, within its walls its students know that, in order to survive, it is necessary to either become a savage or a hypocrite.

The murder of Cadet Arana is proof of the disguised putrefaction of the Leoncio Prado School. During a military practice, the body of the young student falls to the ground with a bullet in the head. Suspicion falls on the Jaguar, the leader of a group of student thugs, but the school authorities prefer to cover up the crime in order to protect the Leoncio Prado's reputation. Lieutenant Gamboa is the

only officer who attempts to find out truth, but this quest only brings him problems. He ends up reassigned to an isolated Andean post. The school thus fulfills its true function. It implicitly teaches the cadets that only through lies and cynicism can one survive in a society as decomposed as that of Lima. Alberto Fernández is a case in point. He knows very well what his father's vices are. He first attempts to resist them, but, after the experience at the Leoncio Prado, he ends up embracing them. "I'll work with my father, and I'll have a convertible and a big house with a swimming pool. I'll marry Marcela and be a Don Juan" (398–99), he concludes near the end of the novel. The youth enters the school to be taught how to be a human being, but exits transformed into a phony with the same worldly ambitions as his father.

Alberto Fernández shows a family resemblance to another of Vargas Llosa's major characters, Santiago Zavala, known as Zavalita, the protagonist of *Conversación en La Catedral* (*Conversation in The Cathedral*, 1975). The main difference between the two is that Zavalita manages to break free from the vicious circle that makes children into versions of their parents. This, however, does not mean that Zavalita has a satisfying life.

Published in 1969, *Conversation in The Cathedral* is even more complex than *The Time of the Hero* because it incorporates Peru's corrupt public and political life. Zavalita grows up in a bourgeois Lima family that enjoys all the privileges of the Latin American well-to-do: education at a private university, free time, domestic help, and the prospect of a prosperous future thanks to social and political connections. But Zavalita is a nonconformist. He knows that his father, Fermín Zavala, supported Odría's coup (the one Ernesto J. Vargas celebrated as a personal triumph). His father's wealth is the result of the favors received from Cayo Bermúdez, the sinister right-hand man of the dictator, who supervised the government's repressive and corrupt undercover operations. Zavalita had been a supporter of the deposed president Bustamante, and he does not feel comfortable enjoying privileges gained thanks to the handouts of a dictatorship. His rebellion consists of taking decisions that contradict the plans his father made for his life. He enrolls in San Marcos, the

public university; joins Cahuide, a clandestine Communist group; becomes a journalist in the tabloid newspaper *La Crónica*; he even marries Ana, a lower-class, mestiza nurse.

Even though the Zavala home gives the impression of being an oasis of sophistication and elegance in the midst of the misery of Lima, this is only a mirage. Just like Alberto's father, Zavalita's is a hypocrite, who uses the splendor of his last name and the appearance of a faultless family life to hide a secret. Fermín Zavala is a homosexual, who satisfies his desire by taking advantage of his naïve and submissive chauffeur Ambrosio.

Zavalita perceives that something is rotten in his family, in his country, and in himself. "He was like Peru . . . he's fucked himself up somewhere along the line" (3), he reflects at the start of the novel. His existential drama originates in that he clearly sees that both he and Peru are "fucked up" because of the corrupt complicity of the country's bourgeois families with the abject dictatorship of General Odría. Out of this putrid marriage of convenience, only hypocrisy and abuse can be born. Economic and political power are in the same hands, and those unable to enter this small group have no access to any type of privilege. Zavalita represents this Peruvian tragedy. He does not want to be part of the problem and, therefore, rebels. He prefers personal failure to enjoying the compromised benefits of social privilege. Zavalita's moral conclusion is dramatic. In a corrupt society, where personal gain is achieved only by oppressing others, failure is more admirable than success.

Conversation in The Cathedral is the great novel of Latin America's failure. It shows the futility of a young man's rebellion against his father, family, and the aspirations of his social class. He achieves nothing, except to wallow in mediocrity and frustration. Zavalita searches for meaning, for something in which to believe, but he finds Communism, God, the APRA party, and even literature, wanting. The dictatorship has achieved its purpose: to disseminate apathy and submissiveness. It has ingrained the idea that nothing can be done; that no one can change individual destiny. Ambrosio, Zavalita, even Peru, have to live day to day without hope of anything ever changing. Disillusionment and a lack of personal projects are

to be found in Ambrosio's statement that closes the novel: "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).

In the fictional world of these two novels, there is no exit. Rebellion ends in failure or frustration. Alberto is corrupted, Zavalita marginalized. Those are the two possible conclusions to the moral drama faced by the characters. The despotic father and the authoritarian dictator undermine the spirit and will of the characters. Through force and oppression, they annul the spiritual qualities that permit an individual to struggle against the adversities and pressures found in their social and cultural environment. Without anything in which to believe and with a weakened will, there is no way out of the vicious circles in Peruvian and Latin American social life.

In Vargas Llosa's early novels, the individual is broken by social structures, instinctive forces, or the pressures of the environment. Characters are shaped by society. Alberto Fernández and Zavalita lack the strong convictions needed to overcome social strictures. They are adrift, lost in the midst of corrupt institutions and flawed families. It is only towards the end of the 1970s that Vargas Llosa will imagine a character able to break free from this perverse social dynamic.

In 1977, he publishes *La tía Julia y el escribidor* (*Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter*, 1982). This novel marks the beginning of a new stage in the production of the Peruvian writer. From then on, his novels will not explore the means by which society obliterates the individual, but rather the resources with which they may be able to survive, and even thrive, against it. He now examines the dangers posed to individuals by the fanaticism of charismatic personalities, unquestioned beliefs, and dogmatic principles.

The protagonist of *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* is Varguitas, an alter-ego of the author. The adventures that take place in the novel are directly inspired in Vargas Llosa's biography. Here, we see again the drama of a young man attempting to take charge of his life in the midst of hostile environment. Varguitas has two goals

in life: to marry his aunt Julia, an older divorcée, and to become a professional writer. But everything is stacked against him. In the Peru of the 1950s, no one could live from literature alone. Getting married to his aunt by marriage without permission from his father is even more unlikely:

My father was a very stern man I'd always been very afraid of. I'd been brought up far away from him, with my mother and her family, and when my parents were reconciled and I went to live with him, we had never gotten along well together. He was conservative and authoritarian, given to cold rages, and if it was true they had written to him, the news would set him off like a bombshell exploding (230–31).

In this novel, we again see how authoritarian intimidation threatens individual desires. But the result is different. Varguitas has something that neither Alberto nor Zavalita possessed, and that makes it possible for him to confront authority. He believes in his vocation as a writer. He has an unquenchable desire to dedicate himself to writing regardless of the cost. This gives him the necessary courage to overcome authoritarianism and social pressure.

In *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter*, the son finally overcomes the father and the reality and coercion of the social environment he represents. This, however, does not mean that Vargas Llosa has finally exorcised the topics of the father and authoritarianism from his novels. In 2000, these reappear with overwhelming force in *La fiesta del Chivo* (*The Feast of the Goat*, 2001), a novel that uncovers the abject submission of a whole country to the corrupt caprice of its self-proclaimed redeemer. After a long sojourn in the United States, Urania, the protagonist of the novel, returns to the Dominican Republic to call to account her father—and through him, the country as a whole—for having submitted to the cruelest whims of Rafael Leonidas Trujillo, the dictator who ruled the Caribbean Island between 1930 and 1961. Urania needs to understand how it could be that, during those years, all the followers and associates of Trujillo, and especially her father, Egghead Cabral, had served the dictator so slavishly. She is also interested in finding out if she