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Reading and Writing for Meaning: Narrative and Biography in *El hablador*

The limited body of critical commentary that addresses Mario Vargas Llosa's recent novel, *El hablador*, focuses on the work's depiction of primitive and modern society in Peru and the dual structure of the novel, which presents two alternating, narrative voices. However, the title of the novel, the biographical nature of the narratives offered by each of the novel's storytellers, and their recurrent references to literary writers or fictional characters suggest another equally valid avenue for critical exploration: the novel as commentary on the relationship of literature to reality, and narrative plot to life. Viewed within this context, the novel may be interpreted as offering a variation on the theme of the writer and the process of writing manifested in earlier works, such as *La tía Julia y el escribidor* and *La señorita de Tacna*.

Like these earlier works, *El hablador* demonstrates a marked interest in traditional storytelling. As in the drama that precedes it, the novel also explores the relationship between oral and written narrative and presents one storyteller writing about another storyteller in the process of telling stories.¹ Moreover, like the author's play, *La señorita de Tacna*, the novel appears to acknowledge that "literature was in the first place created by one person speaking to others and that this primal situation of oral performance is still being recreated or imitated by most literary works" (Boschetto 130). However, while still placing these literary issues in the foreground, *El hablador* goes on to consider other aspects of the origins and functions of narrative plot and their relationship to human experience.

The first voice that speaks to the reader in *El hablador* is that of "a thoughtful, amiably cynical Peruvian writer in Florence" (Le Guin 1) who recounts, in alternating chapters, the tale of his friend, Saúl Zaratás, a student of ethnology. Saúl, also known as Mascarita because of a large birth mark that covers half his face, undergoes a type of transformation or

metamorphosis and becomes a highly respected member of an isolated Amazonian tribe known as the Machiguenga. Among the Machiguenga, Saúl exercises the important function of storyteller, the transmitter of Machiguenga mythology.

The anonymous narrator's sketchy biography of Saúl alternates with chapters narrated by the *hablador* or Saúl, in which the mythology of the Machiguenga is mingled with his own autobiography. Moreover, many of the stories with which Saúl enralls his audience echo his own story of transformation and rebirth; they recount tales of men who were transformed into animals, and trace the origins of the Machiguenga and the world that surrounds them. Among his tales Saúl also includes a reworking of Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, his favorite literary work. Thus, as storyteller, Saúl also accomplishes a permutation of fictional and lived reality through the use of language.

The power of the word to create or recreate reality is the allegorical subject of Saúl's tale of Pachakamue, the first *hablador*, who brings animals and trees into being by uttering their names. This manifestation of language as simultaneous act of narration and creation underscores the generative power of the spoken work. However, Pachakamue's transformations of a given reality result in the disorganization of the world, an undoing of conventions that threatens the established order. Thus, the occasional eruptions of confusion in the ordered Machiguenga world are attributed to his subversive linguistic influence.

The concept of transformation or metamorphosis to which Saúl is so clearly linked through his narrative activities is reiterated further in his proper and descriptive names. His given name, Saúl, brings to mind one of the early Apostles, the famous persecutor of the early Christians, who later converted to Christianity and changed his name to its Greek equivalent, Paul. Saúl's nickname, Mascarita or mask, also alludes to the process of metamorphosis or transformation. As Juan-Eduardo Cirlot notes, the mask traditionally serves the purpose of veiling or hiding from sight the transition from what one is to what one wishes to be, thereby facilitating the process of transformation:

Todas las transformaciones tienen algo de profundamente misterioso y de vergonzoso a la vez, puesto que lo equívoco y ambiguo se produce en el momento en que algo se modifica lo bastante para ser ya "otra cosa," pero aún sigue siendo lo que era. Por ello, las metamorfosis tienen que ocultarse; de ahí la máscara. La ocultación tiende a la transfiguración, a facilitar el traspaso de lo que se es a lo que se quiere ser; éste es su carácter mágico, tan presente en la máscara teatral griega como en la máscara religiosa africana u oceánica. La máscara equivale a la crisálida (299).

The novel's apparent central premise, the mystical rebirth or transformation of Saúl, has received adverse critical reaction from Michiko Kakutani in his review for the *New York Times*. Kakutani centers on the reasons for Saúl's conversion and finds them both contrived and unconvincing. The narrator explains Saúl's identification with the marginalized Machiguenga as a result of Saúl's own status as outsider, a situation attributed in turn to his facial disfigurement and his Jewish background. Unable to accept this convenient explanation, the critic does not become absorbed in Saúl's tales, unlike the Machiguenga audience depicted in the novel. Saúl's discourse is thus characterized as never being fully integrated into the text, and the novel as a whole is considered to be flawed by its failure to fuse the magical elements of the work with those that depict everyday reality.

It is worth noting that the narrator of Saúl's tale poses some of the same questions and doubts about Saúl's complete acceptance within Machiguenga society in the concluding pages of the novel, precisely at the moment in the story when the reader traditionally looks back toward the beginning to arrive at a totalizing vision or comprehension of the text. In this instance, then, the narrator may stand for the figure of the critical reader reviewing the plot of Saúl's human existence. As reader he decides to accept the interpretation of events suggested by the writer, acknowledging that the writer can never know as fact what transpired. He can only imagine or reconstruct events based on the manner in which Saúl's personal story of transformation seems to conclude.

The novel thus anticipates and responds to questions about the nature of biography, its objectivity and putative plot, and it is within this theoretical context that one can better understand the significance of the text's allusions to transformation or metamorphosis. Through the narrative functions of both storytellers, the novel suggests that the biographical narrative, like all narratives, transforms reality to satisfy basic desires. The biographical narrative responds, in particular, to a primordial desire to bring order to otherwise chaotic, random events. The ordering of events is accomplished through plotting, a retrogressive action that starts with knowledge of the end and proceeds back toward the beginning, tracing the connection between events. The reading or writing of biography are thus envisioned in the text as a retrospective search for and recovery of plot, that shaping of events that renders them comprehensible and therefore transmissible or communicable to others. The novel suggests that the successful telling or writing of a "reading," that is, the successful transmission of the story, is directly related to some form of successful transformation that encompasses the storyteller and his material.

The recollection of past events from the present, and the tendency to

read life's experiences according to some masterplot, results in the attachment of a special significance to these events that was not attributed to them at the time of their occurrence. The narrator clearly manifests his awareness of this tendency to "read meaning" into past events early in the novel when describing a conversation with one of Saúl's professors:

No le di mucha importancia a lo que le oí decir aquella tarde a Matos Mar, entre los polvorientos estantes llenos de libros y estatuillas de Quijotes y Sancho Panzas, de la casa mirafiorina de Porras Barronechea, en la calle Colina. Ni tampoco creo habérselo mencionado a Saúl. Pero ahora, aquí, en Firenze, mientras recuerdo y tomo apuntes, ese episodio adquiere retroactivamente una significación grande (35).

Jean-Paul Sartre, to whom the narrator alludes on several occasions as an important model of literary and philosophical thought, has made similar reflections on the manner in which the end determines the reading of the beginning and middle and conveys meaning and necessity to existence. In *Les mots*, Sartre describes the tendency of biographers to create casual relationships between events and to view early, random incidents as revelations of the greatness that was to come. Sartre then began to view his own life as a book read by posterity from death to birth and became, in his words, his own obituary (171). The narrator's observations, as well as those of his model, reiterate the manner in which writer and reader fictionalize human experience both in literature and daily life, transforming the apparently random act into a sign of ultimate destiny.

However, the arbitrary assignment of meaning is not the only questionable aspect of the biographical plot. According to Peter Brooks, the plotting of the life story, the tracing of causes and connections, "depends on probabilistic constructions rather than fact, on imaginary scenarios of lack and desire. . . . What man can be depends on the uncertain relationship of the conscious subject to the unconscious. . . . And the telling of the history of this struggle is always a hypothetical construction" (284). The biographical narrative, as a means to knowledge, is therefore questionable. Both the arbitrariness and subjectivity of its assertions are captured in one of the narrator's final declarations: "He decidido que el hablador de la fotografía de Malfatti sea él. Pues, objetivamente, no tengo manera de saberlo" (230).

Both storytellers' attempts to comprehend and communicate the meaning of an individual or social life through the retrospective biographical plot, and their linkage of the middle aspect of their tales to the subject of transformation, bear significantly on the interpretation of the novel as a self-conscious text. The latter, in particular, takes on special significance in light of modern interpretations of the narrative. The coincidence of the

middle of the novel and the middle of Saúl's tales with the topic of metamorphosis thus warrants greater scrutiny. If this concurrence of narrative aspect and topic is viewed, for example, within the theoretical perspective provided by Tzvetan Todorov, the metafictional message of the text becomes clearer. According to Todorov, narrative is a dynamic process of transformation in which beginning and end stand in the metaphorical relationship of the same but different (225-240). Considered within this critical perspective, the many references to metamorphosis in the text stand for the dynamic process of transformation that characterizes traditional narrative, as well as for the human experience between birth and death and death and rebirth. Saúl and his transfiguration thus represent the coming-into-being of a narrative as well as the coming-into-being of the storyteller; both serve to dramatize the importance of successful transformation to successful transmission.

Bearing in mind these and earlier observations on the functions of the storyteller within the novel, one may conclude that traditional storytelling is conceived of as a transfiguration of the storyteller's conscious and unconscious reality, reflected in the transformations of his subject and plot, producing something that is the same but different. Moreover, this process is initially veiled or "masked" by the characters and their activities, a circumstance alluded to by Saúl's nickname and his attempts to conceal his conversion from friends and acquaintances.

While the framework of the secularized, biographical plot provides the anonymous narrator the means of comprehending his friend's individual existence, the framework of the sacred masterplot shapes the tales that the *hablador* will transmit to his people. This sacred masterplot, on which Saúl models his own narration, emphasizes the concept of the Chosen People and the role of revelation, magic, religion, providence and destiny in comprehending the world. Both voices, however, utilize the medium of the story to offer an explanatory narrative that seeks its authority in a return to origins and a tracing from beginning to end. The narrator's search for the origins of Saúl's conversion is at the same time, moreover, a quest to uncover his own identity as writer and to convey meaning to his own literary activities. That is to say, he wishes to uncover the story or plot of his own existence as well.

The opposition between the secular and the sacred masterplot, between narration from the margin and from the center, reflected in the discourse of the two storytellers, is suggested in the opening chapter of the novel. The anonymous narrator has chosen to leave Peru and journey to Italy to study the works of the Renaissance, particularly the works of Dante and Machiavelli. The reference to the Renaissance, which echoes the theme of rebirth, also calls to mind the birth of the "large process of secularization which gathered momentum during the Enlightenment [and] which marks

a falling away from revealed plots—the Chosen People, Redemption, the Second Coming” (Brooks 6). At the same time, specific references to the works of Dante and Machiavelli denote the coexistence of two different narrative frameworks, one related to the sacred masterplot, the other to the secular. The coexistence of these two narrative frameworks echoes that of the two parallel tracks of discourse in *El hablador*, which reflect each other but which do not join or fuse. While in Florence, the narrator visits an exhibit of the Machiguenga and discovers the image of his friend in one of the exhibit’s photographs. Motivated by this discovery, the narrator’s long-postponed and frustrated attempts to write on the figure of the *hablador* are overcome: his silence is broken and the desired text is realized. However, his narration comes from the outside, from the distant observer far removed from the intimate circle of listeners surrounding the *hablador* in the center of the photograph.

The contrastive, parallel structure of the novel, which permits a view of the *hablador* from within and from without, is echoed in one of the novel’s striking images. While at the university, Saúl presents the narrator with a gift, a Machiguenga artifact which is engraved with the figures of two parallel labyrinths. According to Saúl, the figures represent “el orden que reina en el mundo” (17). The twisting or distortion of these lines leads to the disintegration of life and a return to the original chaos and confusion from which the Creator led Man, and from which, we might add, the traditional storyteller, through plotting, attempts to lead his audience.

The thematic significance of this image, which mirrors the parallel structure of the novel, can best be understood if one takes into account the author’s critical commentaries on narrative, and in particular, his analysis of *Madame Bovary*. According to Malva Filer, Vargas Llosa’s remarks indicate a preference for works “built with order and symmetry, that have a beginning and an end, and impress us as self-sufficient, closed and finished” (109). Vargas Llosa also elaborated on the need to abolish the author from the text, insisting that autonomy was a necessary condition for the existence of fiction. Most importantly, according to Filer, Vargas Llosa speaks of a totalizing design, constituted through the association of opposites; it is expressed in fictitious reality through a binary system in which the opposites do not merge into a synthesis but coexist as different but mutually dependent elements (113). Viewed within this theoretical perspective, the parallel labyrinths represent not only the Machiguenga totalizing vision of the Cosmos; they also exemplify, together with the parallel structure of the novel, the author’s vision of a totalizing design in narrative fiction, one which stresses the separation of the writer from his character, the coexistence of fictional planes rather than their conmingling.

The novel’s concern with the autonomy of the character is also reflected in the narrator’s observations on his earlier, failed attempts to produce a

text about the Machiguenga and the *hablador*. The narrator attributes his earlier failures to his difficulty in separating author from character; his tendency to impose his own secular philosophy and speech patterns on the utterances of his primitive character produced a fraudulent style which he compares to that of eighteenth century authors writing about "el buen salvaje." The narrator's comments, that bear significantly on the issue of fictional autonomy, also underscore the self-conscious nature of the text:

La respuesta que solía dar . . . era la dificultad que significaba inventar, en español, y dentro de esquemas lógicos, una forma literaria que verosímilmente sugiriese la manera de contar de un hombre primitivo, de mentalidad mágico-religiosa. Todos mis intentos culminaban siempre en un estilo que me parecía tan obviamente fraudulento, tan poco persuasivo como aquellos en los que, en el siglo XVIII, cuando se puso de moda en Europa "el buen salvaje," hacían hablar a sus personajes exóticos los filósofos y novelistas de la Ilustración (152).

The tendency to "read" plot or meaning into events and to write "readings" according to a master framework is also encapsulated or encoded in the image of the photograph of the *hablador*, with which the novel begins and concludes. The image of the storyteller is first introduced as a figure among a series of photographs taken by the Italian Malfatti, through which the latter attempts to describe the existence of an Amazonian tribe. Malfatti's photographs attempt to display a reality without ideological intent or artistic considerations. Thus, the storyteller of his pictorial essay is a partially shadowed figure performing in a ritualistic setting whose meaning is not provided. The storyteller himself has no story. The event, as recorded through the objective lens of Malfatti remains unavailable for interpretation; its significance is obscured or veiled, like the figure in the shadows. The narrator views Malfatti's photograph and later discovers or invents a revelatory plot that lies hidden in the shadowy figure. The *hablador* of the photograph, he concludes, is his childhood friend, Saúl Zaratas. His plotting or "reading" of the photograph as the story of Saúl's rebirth conveys meaning and significance to the event recorded by Malfatti.

The narrator's interpretation or "reading" of the photograph thus reveals not only the story of the Machiguenga storyteller, but the story of a particular storyteller. From the indefinite and generic expression *un hablador*, with which the first chapter concludes, we move to the specific *el hablador*, Saúl Zaratas, whom the narrator identifies in the final chapter as the figure in the photograph. The photograph alluded to in the beginning is the same but somehow different from the photograph in the end; it has been transformed through plotting. The photograph now has a comprehensible story that can be transmitted; the act of transmission itself is

alluded to through the narrator's reference to his pen and ink with which he transcribes Saúl's story. Moreover, the narrator's interpretation or plotting of the photograph parallels his short-lived activities as scriptwriter for a television program, in which he again provides his audience the perspective and meaning of the events to be viewed.

The photograph of the *hablador* stands at beginning and end of the text as a metaphor of the dynamics of narrative, of the relationship of narrative beginnings and endings. If we accept Brooks's definition of metaphor as a means of conveying "a synthetic grasp or presentation of a situation" (27), we may interpret the initial photograph presented by Malfatti as a metaphor of blinded transmission; it does not reveal or see any historic meaning. The photograph in the conclusion presents a metaphor of enlightened transmission; its historical significance has been revealed, the shadows removed. Moreover, if we refer back to Todorov's theory on the narrative, beginning and end offer an example of what Todorov terms "narrative transformation," in which the start and conclusion stand in the relationship of the same but different.

In conclusion, Vargas Llosa's novel, *El hablador*, reveals how intertwined our lives are with narrative. Narrative offers not only its capacity to provide diversion but its power to bind together a people or a culture. Moreover, traditional narrative with its emphasis on end-determined plot, attempts to satisfy a primordial desire to comprehend and transmit knowledge, to make sense of life, when no other form of explanation will suffice. At the same time, however, the biographical narrative as a source of knowledge or self-knowledge is questioned and undermined in the text. The novel suggests, like the author's earlier works, that the imposition of plot on life leads to the arbitrary attribution of meaning to events and to the creation of purely hypothetical constructions. Experience or the recollection of events is necessarily complemented or completed by imagination; that is, imagination ultimately transforms them into something that is the same but different. As a result, the acquisition of absolute knowledge or truth is always thwarted. Reader and writer are irrevocably trapped within the paradoxical dialectic of the desire to know and the need to transform in order to know and transmit knowledge.

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NOTE

1. See Sandra M. Boschetto, "On the Margins of Self-Conscious Disclosure: Reading and Writing as Conversation in Mario Vargas Llosa's *La señorita de Tacna*," in *Things Done with Words: Speech Acts in Hispanic Drama* (Newark: Juan de la Cuesta, 1986) 127-144.

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