

Mario Vargas Llosa's *El hablador*
as a Discourse of Conquest¹

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Introduction

The indigenist novel is one of the major examples of Peruvian literature that reflects multicultural realities and generates an image of nation based on indigenous traditions. Mario Vargas Llosa's *El hablador* (1987) (*The Storyteller* [1990]), addresses issues related to these traditions. This novel, however, proposes to deconstruct indigenist narrative, and promotes the assimilation of Indian cultures under the model of modernity.²

In this sense, *El hablador* is written as a discourse of conquest in which the construction of the self—through the evocation of various oppositions—represents an allegory of the modern nation. I begin this study with an analysis of the notion of discourse of conquest, as well as one of its most reiterated images of power, the “civilization-barbarism” dichotomy. I follow this with an analysis of the oppositions through which the representation of the self and the nation are elaborated.

The discourse of conquest: a hypothesis

Both Angel Rama's theory of transculturation narrative and Antonio Cornejo Polar's theory of literary heterogeneity address the dynamic that occurs as a result of the violent clash between the diverse cultures of Latin America.³ The discourse of conquest arises out of this conflictive coexistence. This type of literature is

both an expression and a tool in power relationships between the self and the other.

The model for the discourse of conquest arose during the period of Colonial literature (Columbus's and Cortés's *Letters*, for example), and persists in contemporary Latin American literature today. Although the European conquest is described as the most traumatic in Latin American history because it affected the entire region, it has not been the only one.⁴ In this case, I understand the term "conquest" in a broader sense. Ordinarily, it refers to the acquisition of territory that had previously belonged to another people. However, I also apply the term "conquest" to those situations in which the land in question already belonged, at least technically, to the national government or to private landholders but harbored longstanding populations that were unwilling to go along with the dominant national project and so had to be subjugated before the project could proceed.

The discourse of conquest has been repeated in various historical periods and settings in Latin America: in the conquest of the Argentinean pampa, depicted in *Facundo* (1884) by Domingo Faustino Sarmiento; the conquest of the Andes described in Clorinda Matto de Turner's literary work; and the conquest of the Venezuelan savanna, presented in the classic novel *Doña Bárbara* (1929), by Rómulo Gallegos. As these and other texts demonstrate, the concept of conquest transcends historical-literary periods, becoming a generalized discourse in several Latin American regions.

The notion of a discourse of conquest implies different stages in the relationship between the self and the other. Initially, the relationship between the self's space and the other's space is represented as a separation, here/there (Certeau 238). Next, the self travels to the other's territory, producing an encounter between the two. Then the self attempts to dominate the other and its space. This operation of domination can be achieved through various strategies such as the rendering of the Indians as serfs, as in Columbus's *Letters*, or the use of education as a tool to assimilate the other within the self's cultural model.⁵ The conquest reaches one of its peak moments when the self builds a new city in the space "there": the self's order is imposed upon the other's

order. Rabasa provides an example of this scenario in the building of Mexico upon the ruins of Tenochtitlán initiated by Cortés (145).

Self-legitimization is one of the characteristics of the discourse of conquest that permits the self to value its own actions. The process of self-legitimization is produced, initially, when a pejorative conception of the other is generated (Todorov 146). For example, in several colonial texts, the Indian is represented as either an inferior human being or a superior animal (López Baralt 81). Rolena Adorno's study of the catechisms published in the sixteenth century establishes that the representation of conqueror-conquered is based on oppositions such as bestiality/humanity and barbarism/civilization (32). Self-legitimization necessarily arises during the conquering process because the conqueror presumably carries out the actions of a higher power. The conqueror recognizes and is recognized by a superior entity, which may be God, the idea of progress or modernization, or several other ethnic, political, or religious characteristics. This superior entity continues to surface in Latin American literary history, even though it becomes modified according to new socio-historical conditions. For example, in colonial literature, there are several texts that represent the imperial endeavor as a Christian enterprise (Adorno 240): Gabriel Lobo Lasso, for example, transforms Cortés from leader of the conquest to Christian General, turning the conquest of Mexico into a saintly crusade (Amor y Vásquez 186). *Doña Bárbara* provides an example from contemporary Latin American literature. In this novel, Santos Luzardo, the protagonist, justifies his conquest of the Venezuelan savanna in terms of progress.

“Civilization vs. barbarism”

El hablador contains one of the major images of power expressed in the discourse of conquest, the dichotomy “civilization/barbarism.”⁶ Both terms refer to imaginary characterizations from the perspective of the conqueror (Baretta and Markoff 592). Moreover, “civilization/barbarism” establishes a hierarchical rela-

tionship between conqueror and conquered through the representation of space, time, and identity.

The dichotomy "civilization/barbarism" reinforces the difference between the self's space and the other's space. "Civilization" is located in the center and possesses the power to impose its values (Masiello 3). In contrast, the groups defined as "barbaric" are located in the periphery. This division of space involves the exclusion of "barbaric" groups, which reinforces the distance between the self and the other (Baretta 596). At the same time, the dichotomy "civilization/barbarism" implies a value judgment about territory. The self's space, the center, is delineated by means of several signifiers that create a positive image. It is precisely this type of image that justifies the use of power on the part of the "civilized man." "Barbarism," corresponding to the space located in the periphery, in the savanna, in the jungle, in the pampa, is characterized as a territory that must be transformed by "civilization" and is depicted by negative features.

In addition to expressing the distance between two territories, the dichotomy "civilization/barbarism" expresses the relationship between space and time. In this sense, "civilization" refers to the present and the future. In the present, the conqueror is portrayed as a man who has already learned the rules and values of "civilization." Likewise, "civilization" refers to the future because the conqueror expects and hopes to transform the other's space into one similar to his her own. For example, in *Facundo* the image of self has already been influenced by Western society, which is "civilized" according to Sarmiento. This self desires to create the nation of the future through populating the Argentinean pampas with European immigrants and imposing a specific model of education. In *Doña Bárbara*, Santos Luzardo, the protagonist, is a lawyer who institutes a new system of agricultural exploitation (the system of the future). He also imposes a process of education upon a "barbaric woman," which is symbolized in his relationship with Marisela.

On the other hand, "barbarism" represents past and present. The term evokes the past because it refers to a certain type of socio-political organization characterized as an archaic one. In this sense, Iris Zavala says that the dichotomy "barbarism/civili-

zation” corresponds to nature/culture, so that the first component of the oppositions expresses the lack of technology, knowledge, language, and morality (334). This socio-political organization, conceived as an old historical model, continues to survive in the present. It is not a model that has been destroyed and forgotten, but rather one that persists.

Through these implications concerning the relationship between space and time, the dichotomy “civilization barbarism” reflects two significant concepts. First, it depicts an ongoing struggle between two models of socio-political organization. Second, it conveys a hierarchical relationship between them which allows the conqueror to conceive the “barbaric” model, the old historical structure, as one that should disappear. Conversely, the “civilization” model is depicted as a dynamic force that represents the hope of the future.

The dichotomy “civilization/barbarism” not only reflects space and time. It also reinforces the identity of the conqueror using the technique that Hayden White defines as ostensive self-definition by negation:

If we do not know what we think “civilization” is, we can always find an example of what it is not. If we are unsure of what sanity is, we can at least identify madness when we see it. Similarly, in the past, when men were uncertain as to the precise quality of their sensed humanity, they appealed to the concept of wildness to designate an area of subhumanity that was characterized by everything they hoped they were not. (152)

In this sense, the representation of negative models by the hegemonic group serves a double function. First, it defines the other groups, and second, from the other’s definition, it delimits the acceptable behavior of the members of the elite (Baretta 593). In the otherness definition, ethnicity is one of the most important characteristics; not to belong to the “chosen” race has been a justification for being excluded as other, for being taken as slave, or for being destroyed (Fernández Retamar 185). In this sense, a caste system was conceived during the colonial period in Latin America, which enabled the conquerors to represent the Indian and *mestizo* population as abnormal.⁷

As mentioned earlier, conquerors need to justify their agenda and normally profess to enjoy the support of a superior entity that approves of their actions. From the perspective of the conqueror, there is a relationship between the conquered and the superior entity that is characterized by mutual exclusion. In other words, the conquered neither recognize the superior entity nor receive recognition from it. This double negation contributes to the representation of the conquered as “barbaric.” Thus, the “barbaric” population denies and is denied by the same superior entity which acknowledges and legitimizes the conqueror.

A Ventriloquized Narrative

While in nineteenth-century Latin American fiction family relationships symbolize the new nations (Sommer 31), in *El hablador* the way the character narrators are portrayed, as well as their functions in different cultures, creates an allegory of the nation.⁸ In this sense, in *El hablador* there are two contrasting stories told by two narrators. The first narrator—as in other of Vargas Llosa’s novels, specifically *La tía Julia y el escribidor* (1977) (*Aunt Julia and the Storywriter*) and *Historia de Mayta* (1984) (*Mayta’s Story*)—is identified with the writer. It is an autobiographical situation in which the narrator searches for and puts in order several pieces of a puzzle. In addition, Vargas Llosa uses his own experience in the novel to attribute greater authenticity to his speech and emphasize his authority.⁹

The second narrator is Saúl Zuratas, nicknamed “Mascarita” ‘Tiny Mask’. He was the closest friend of the first narrator during college and later abandons modern society to become the “hablador,” the storyteller for the Machiguenga, a small indigenous community in the Peruvian Amazon. Machiguenga rituals, cosmogony, and moral codes are narrated through Mascarita’s voice. This narrative situation, however, does not present the marginal self speaking from its own perspective. Mascarita’s voice is actually a projection of the main narrator through a process that I call “ventriloquized narrative.” It is expressed in *El hablador* by means of several oppositions: the different spaces from which the two narrators speak; the distinct physical-psychological de-

scriptions of the characters; the particular resources of their knowledge (erudition vs. popular tradition); and the diversity of their communication systems (writing vs. orality).¹⁰ Thus, ventriloquized narrative does not represent a true image of the other but rather an implied otherness that reinforces the destruction of Machiguenga culture. In *El hablador*, otherness is conceived, first, as an entity that cannot access but, paradoxically, can threaten the project of modernization defended by Vargas Llosa, and, second, as a homogeneous and global image without any intrinsic ethnic, religious or socio-political distinction.¹¹ In other words, for the conqueror, all the Indian cultures would have the same characteristics. Thus, proposing the acculturation of Machiguengas—a small group—is a metonymy to express the destruction of the Peruvian Indian cultures—several millions of people.

As mentioned, in *El hablador*, ventriloquized narrative is based on several oppositions. The first is the two different territories from which each narrator enunciates his speeches. Initially, both character narrators are located in the same space when they are college classmates in Lima, but later, they move out to other territories, where they obtain knowledge and power. The journeys of the narrator identified with Vargas Llosa can be classified according to their final destination: Europe in some cases, the Peruvian jungle in others. In Europe, the main narrator achieves the peace that he was unable to find in Peru, a fact that reflects his integration into Western society. He tells his story from a cosmopolitan space, Florence, where he has moved for the purpose of running away from Peruvian reality: "I came to Firenze to forget Peru and the Peruvians for a while . . ." (*The Storyteller* 3). In other words, the story is narrated from a space characterized as a center of "civilization" through which the narrator can escape from his own reality. In contrast to Mascarita's voyages, the journeys that "Vargas Llosa" takes to the jungle do not motivate him to integrate himself into the Amazonian communities. His purpose is to show Indian customs to Western readers. It is a journey to "there" (the Peruvian jungle), where he collects information about the other to communicate within his own cosmopolitan territory.

Mascarita, on the other hand, travels to the Peruvian jungle, where he realizes a process of integration into the Machiguenga community and is transformed into “el hablador,” the storyteller, a personage who is the possessor and depository of collective memory. Because the Machiguenga are nomads, Mascarita travels around the jungle in order to orally preserve their traditions: “Since then I’ve been talking. Walking. And I shall keep on till I go. Because I am the storyteller” (211). Mascarita’s power is not only to pass on the traditions, but also to maintain the highest possible level of integration in the Machiguenga community.

The opposition Florence vs. Peruvian jungle—a center of “civilization” vs. a marginal region—corresponds to the contrasting descriptions of the narrators. There are some links between the physical-psychological features of the narrators and the ideological projects which they defend. As a result, the “normal” or “abnormal” traits of each character determine the legitimacy or lack of legitimacy of their ideological beliefs.¹²

On the physical plane, Mascarita, like other images of “barbarism,” is portrayed as a monster: “Saúl Zuratas had a dark birthmark, the color of wine dregs, that covered the entire right side of his face, and unruly red hair as stiff as the bristles of a scrub brush. . . . He was the ugliest lad in the world . . .” (9). Mascarita was not accepted in Peruvian society because of these physical features. According to “Vargas Llosa’s” character, this rejection explains Mascarita’s interest in the Machiguenga community:

Both he and they [the Machiguengas] were anomalies in the eyes of other Peruvians. His birthmark aroused in them, in us, the same feelings, deep down, as those creatures living somewhere far away, half naked, eating each other’s lice and speaking incomprehensible dialects. Was this the origin of Mascarita’s love at first sight for the tribal Indians, the “chunchos”? Had he unconsciously identified with those marginal beings because of the birthmark that made him, too, a marginal being, every time he went out on the streets? (28)

Psychologically, Mascarita is depicted as non-violent, a clear weakness from the perspective of the “Vargas Llosa” character narrator: “but he [Mascarita] was also a likable and exception-

ally good person" (8). When a drunk insulted Mascarita, calling him monster, he behaved peacefully: "But if this [his face] is the only one I've got, what do you suggest I do?" Saúl said, smiling. 'Come on, don't be a drag—let us by'" (14). In contrast, the "Vargas Llosa" character reacts violently to the same situation: "At that, I lost my patience. I grabbed the toper by the lapels and started shaking him. There was a show of fits, people milling round, some pushing and shoving . . ." (14).

Curiously, pacifism is a value of the Machiguenga community, and is also one of the salient features in other representations of the "savage." Columbus, for example, defines Indian culture as "savage" through three characteristics: nudity, their incapacity to conduct business (based upon the observation that they did not have commercial relationships according to European rules), and their policy of non-violence, because Indians did not have weapons (Pastor 56-57). This image of the other reveals Columbus's assumption, as in *El hablador*, that violence is a principal characteristic in the rendition of the "civilized man."

Each narrator has a different ideological project. Mascarita defends *indigenismo*, while Vargas Llosa proposes the imposition of a process of modernization:

I was amazed at how much he knew about the tribe. . . . He talked of those Indians, of their customs and myths, of their surroundings and their gods, with the respect and admiration that were mine when I brought up the names of Sartre, Malraux, and Faulkner, my favorite authors that year. (*The Storyteller* 16)

However, the defense of Indian cultures is realized by a character who is represented as "abnormal" and is not accepted in modern society. Thus, by marginalizing Mascarita on the basis of his physical/psychological condition, "Vargas Llosa" attempts to invalidate his defense of *indigenismo*. By contrast, the implication remains that Vargas Llosa's political opinions are a consequence of his "normal" physical and psychological conditions, thus supporting his ideological argument.

Another opposition between the two narrators is evident in their different sources of knowledge. Mascarita's knowledge seems to be based on popular and oral tradition¹³: "They let me listen

to what they said, to learn what they were. I wanted to know how they lived, that is to say. To hear it from their mouths” (209). As in other oral cultures, memory is the only tool that the Machiguenga can use to keep and remember their history: “Of all things I heard [Mascarita says], I didn’t forget a one” (210). However, Mascarita’s knowledge, based on popular and oral traditions, is simply an illusion that plays a role in the ventriloquized narrative. Instead of using the oral Machiguenga stories as a resource to recreate their cosmogony, the narrator “Vargas Llosa” prefers to resort to the publications by the Summer Institute of Linguistics and texts written by missionaries who worked in the Amazon centuries ago (Franco 17).

On the other hand, Vargas Llosa’s knowledge is based first on the erudition that he shows through several cultured references which contrast with the Machiguenga cosmogony and second on the type of life he had: “I had only morning classes at the university, and each afternoon I used to spend several hours at the National Library . . .” (103). This dichotomy, popular knowledge vs. erudition, coexists with another one, orality vs. writing. In contrast to Arguedas’s fiction, in which different voices from several cultures coexist and represent a non-homogeneous image of nation (Cornejo Polar, *Escribir* 217-18), and also in contrast to indigenist fiction which uses a language that integrates some Quechua forms (170-71), the style of the chapters told by “Vargas Llosa” is characterized by written discourse. In these chapters, narrative strategies that belong to modern fiction are employed, as well as a journalistic style, enriched by the vocabulary and grammar of an educated and cosmopolitan writer.

As part of the ventriloquized narrative, the novel recreates the narrative form of Machiguenga myths in the chapters told by Mascarita. One story, for example, begins as follows:

This is the story of creation.
This is the fight between Tasurinchi and Kientibakori.
That was before. (*The Storyteller* 213)

Behind this supposed orality—Vargas Llosa does not employ the oral tradition, but rather written texts to recreate the Machiguenga cosmogony—there is another recurrent character-

istic of the image of “barbarism”: the lack of writing as a deficiency. The Machiguengas, the “barbaric group,” transmit their traditions orally. The conqueror, or “civilized man,” writes and privileges writing as the preferred communication system. For him, writing and reading—and the “Vargas Llosa” character is a greedy reader—are basic characteristics of the “civilized man” and also are the two main elements of a specific cultural production (González Stephan 113). Thus, Vargas Llosa seems to define the oral stories as the praxis of nomads and “barbaric” cultures (Franco 17) realized by men who are rejected by modern society.

The representations of the two narrators through these oppositions create a depreciatory image of the Machiguenga (and thus, of all Peruvian Indian cultures). Moreover they construct an authoritarian self which is, after all, an allegory of the type of society that Vargas Llosa desires. This authoritarian self is characterized first by the fact that it denies any possibility of existence to the other, which, after all, expresses the rejection of the image of nation based on Indian traditions. Second, it defines itself as a superior culture with the right to destroy others. In this respect, Vargas Llosa has written in *El hablador*:

We had no alternative. If the price to be paid for development and industrialization for the sixteen million Peruvians meant that those few thousand naked Indians would have to cut their hair, wash off their tattoos, and become mestizos—or, to use the ethnologist’s most detested word, become acculturated—well, there was no way round it. (*The Storyteller* 22)

Hence, for Vargas Llosa, a defense of Indian cultures does not have any legitimacy. It is an obstacle to be overcome in order to achieve the status of a modern nation. In Vargas Llosa’s image of his nation, Indian communities would not play any role. For him, there exists only one possibility: imposing modernity, although the price is to destroy otherness.

Notes

1. I wish to acknowledge Lisa Huempfner, Viann Pederson de Castañeda, and Kathleen Tobin for their comments and suggestions.
2. Mariátegui notes that indigenist literature is written by non-Indian writers (274).
3. For a complete discussion of these two hypothesis, see Angel Rama, Antonio Cornejo Polar ("El indigenismo"), and Friedhelm Schmid.
4. See Bhabha, for a significant analysis of the colonial and post-colonial condition.
5. See Freire, for a lengthy elaboration of this point.
6. The image of the "savage"—and not the term "barbarism"—was used in *Columbus's Letters*. However, the delineation of "civilization-barbarism" began during the colonial period with Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda's *Demócrates Segundo o de las justas causas de la guerra contra los indios* (Demócrates II or about the just causes of the Wars Against the Indians). Since the period of Independence (1810-1830), the dichotomy "civilization-barbarism" has been elaborated in several texts originating different Latin American regions.
7. "Mestizo" is a term used to name Latin American populations descending from Spanish conquerors and Indians.
8. The term "national allegory" was coined by Jameson (65-88). Although Ahmad has proposed several oppositions to this term, I consider Jameson's reflections very insightful (3-25).
9. Cornejo Polar applies these concepts to colonial texts in *Escribir en el aire: Ensayo sobre la heterogeneidad socio-cultural en las literaturas andinas* (84-85).
10. I wish to acknowledge Carlos Orihuela for his unpublished study, in which he considers that all dichotomies represented in *El hablador* are based on the main opposition Machiguenga Utopia vs. Peruvian Reality.
11. Concerning this relationship between the self and the other, see Zizek, specifically, the chapter titled "Formal Democracy and its Discontents."
12. This narrative strategy was employed by Vargas Llosa before in *Historia de Mayta*. In it, Vargas Llosa attempts to explain the

protagonist's decision to adopt Marxist ideology as a result of his rejection by his society.

13. With popular culture, I refer to folklore, and indigenous and ethnic cultures.

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