

NARRATIVE TEXTURES IN *CONVERSACIÓN EN LA CATEDRAL*

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Among the common points of convergence which may be postulated for the *nueva narrativa latinoamericana* figure an increasing emphasis on language¹ (form as opposed to content) and a move away from the realism/naturalism typical of earlier Latin American literature.² The emphasis on language (indeed the *nueva narrativa* has often been described as the *novela de lenguaje*) has been responsible for focusing the attention of the reader away from plot details and toward the process of literary creation itself, creating, in many instances, a sort of meta-novel. The most extreme cases of emphasis on the process of narrative creation include such works as *Tres tristes tigres*, *José Trigo*, *Farabeuf*, etc., where language and structure totally dominate the novel, to the nearly complete exclusion of plot.

At an intermediate point on this literary continuum one finds the novels of Mario Vargas Llosa, considered one of the protagonists of the current Latin American literary generation. While all of his novels to date have dealt with specific Peruvian situations and phenomena, Vargas Llosa has created works which at the same time transcend the purely regional. In all of his novels, a

¹ See the commentary by Carlos Fuentes in *La Nueva Narrativa Hispanoamericana* (México: Joaquín Mortiz, 1970).

² Cf., for example, John S. Brushwood, *The Spanish American Novel, a Twentieth Century Survey* (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1975), Chaps. 15ff.

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series of subplots is intricately woven together into a complex narrative texture which only careful reading and rereading will unravel completely. In order to realize this textual complexity, which increases both in number of examples and in variety of techniques from *La ciudad y los perros*, through *La casa verde*, to *Conversación en la Catedral*, Vargas Llosa has increasingly emphasized narrative techniques, none of which totally ruptures the grammatical fibres of the Spanish language, but which when combined create a shimmering and puzzling fabric whose total penetration lies as a reward at the end of a long path of painstaking perusal.

The present note will focus on certain technical aspects of the narrative structure of *Conversación en la Catedral*; in particular, an attempt will be made to enumerate the ways in which the author allows the narrative to traverse a number of parallel sub-paths, while remaining tied to and dominated by a major plot-line. The result of such considerations, while consisting solely of descriptive material, will highlight the interaction between language and textual structures in this highly complex novel.

Santiago Zavala, son of the late senator Fermín Zavala, is a reporter for a Lima newspaper. Upon returning home one day he is informed by his wife that their pet dog was snatched from her arms by an over-zealous dog catcher and carried away to the pound. A visit by Zavala to the pound turns up, in addition to the abducted pet, Ambrosio Pardo, former chauffeur of Fermín Zavala and Cayo Bermúdez, deposed government strongman. Zavala and Ambrosio proceed to a bar, "La Catedral," where, during a heavy drinking spree, both men pour out their stories. The remainder of the four large sections of the novel is devoted to a recapitulation of this conversation, generally in indirect flashbacks, but from time to time

also focusing on the speakers themselves. The methods by which the details of the past are brought out are many and varied, and form the basis for the impact which the novel effects upon the reader accustomed to reading such plot lines in a totally different format.

The four approximately equal parts into which the novel is divided are stylistically quite different from each other, although each contains a continuation of the fundamental narrative thread. Part I contains numerous flashbacks, interspersed with the narrative flow without any textual signals such as quotation marks or authorial comments, as well as frequent shifts of speaker, again without overt indication. Part II contains no major flashbacks, but rather consists of numerous sketches, each dealing with a particular series of historical events concerning one or more of the protagonists. Part III returns to the use of juxtapositions, but this time with more clearly delimited boundaries. Finally Part IV is perhaps the most heterogeneous, with juxtapositions not only of chronological events, but also of speakers, occurring repeatedly throughout the text, frequently in the middle of a line, and often with no signalled boundaries. Thus one gets the feeling of having read four separate novels, each the sequel to the last, with all of the loose ends accounted for only at the conclusion of the final one.

Of key importance to the structural development of *Conversación en la Catedral* is the relation between underlying narrative system and the concrete realizations found in the text. In structuralist terms, this refers to the opposition between *paradigm* and *syntagm*. The paradigm is the underlying system of possibilities, representing the maximal set of choices or alternatives present at any given point in time. Thus the paradigm for a particular verbal slot might be the entire conjuga-

tion of that verb, whereas the paradigm for a particular character slot in a narrative would be the complete cast of characters of the entire work. The syntagm, on the other hand, is the concrete realization of the paradigm, in which a single choice from the paradigm is made for each individual slot. Originally derived from consideration of the spoken chain, the syntagm is also a useful concept when dealing with narrative structures, for the actual textual surface may be regarded as the result of a series of choices, involving grammatical, narrative and character units or slots.

It is a fundamental tenet of structuralism that the syntagm and the paradigm, representing in effect two orthogonal axes, are normally opposed to each other across the expanse of a corpus of data; that is, a syntagmatic element could, if successively replaced by others also appropriate in that same environment, generate the entire paradigm representing that particular slot. However, inherent in the definitions themselves is the possibility for a certain measure of overlapping and interaction between the paradigm and syntagm, often producing highly unusual results.

Of great significance to the domain of literary studies are those instances where a paradigm or total set of structures is extended into a syntagm or concrete text. Such a possibility, as noted by Roland Barthes,³ Roman Jakobson⁴ and others, accounts for a great number of creative phenomena, and above all in the realm of literary creation has been responsible for a number of narrative techniques. In essences, paradigmatic overlapping occurs when the author presents, in the same expanse of text

³ Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, trans. A. Lavers, C. Smith (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967).

⁴ Roman Jakobson, *Child Language and Aphasia* (The Hague: Mouton 1973), and the references given therein.

(i.e. a single syntagm), a number of variants which would normally be considered equivalent members of a paradigmatic set, thus ordinarily requiring the choice of one such variant to the exclusion of the others. The technical devices by means of which an author may effect paradigmatic overlapping are many, and include various types of verbal games, as well as the concurrent presentation of several alternate versions of a single situation or scene. In all such cases, the reader is left in the somewhat tenuous position of having to reconstruct a single syntagm or perhaps a set of equivalent syntagms, from the multiplicity of data at his disposal. He is in effect drawn into the process of creation, left as it were with a set of building blocks and a rudimentary plan and free to rearrange them in any fashion consistent with the basic constraints found in the narrative. Unlike with surrealism, the reader is not left totally directionless, but instead is presented with a number of equally likely directions, rather like Alice in Wonderland, thereby absolving the author of the need to present a single unified plot and placing him in the position of the vendor of pre-fabricated modules which the do-it-yourself advocate can assemble to suit his fancy.

Vargas Llosa, it will be claimed, has written, in *Conversación en la Catedral*, a novel making use in many instances of the overlapping of the paradigm onto the syntagm, in order to achieve results similar to those mentioned above. He has done so, however, without presenting paradigmatic lists or displays from which the reader must choose the appropriate member; the principal narrative technique employed by Vargas Llosa is the interchanging, often with vertiginous rapidity, of narrators and narrative point of view, in such a manner as to create the impression of simultaneous texts, each proffered by a different narrator. This sort of narrative

device fits into the category which Martín⁵ has called *sintagma de eslabones interpuestos*. This rapid and unsignalled switching of narrative perspective is not original with Vargas Llosa; among recent Latin American novels Carpentier's *Recurso del Método*, Roa Bastos' *Yo el Supremo* and García Márquez's *El otoño del Patriarca* offer a similar bill of fare. However, in *Conversación* this device has been elevated from the status of a mere narrative technique to a central cohesive force, forming in fact part of the central semantic structure upon which interpretation of the novel is based.

The novel⁶ begins with the scene between Zavala and his wife, Ana, in which Santiago learns of the kidnapping of the family pet. Throughout the pages, fragments of direct dialog of the characters, indicated by the usual signs of punctuation, are interspersed with indirect dialog, reproduced in a style indicative of a particular character, and woven directly into the narrative itself. For example (17): "La besa en la sien, cálmate amor, le acaricia el rostro cómo había sido, la lleva del hombro hacia la casa, no llores sonsita," or again (17-8): "Coje el saco que ha arrojado sobre una silla y da un paso hacia la puerta, pero Ana lo ataja: que almorzara primero rapidito, amor... Santiago golpea la mesa: se había robado a su perro, se lo habían arrancado a su señora de las manos, el hombre respinga asustado, carajo esto no se iba a quedar así." In examples such as these, which recur with great frequency throughout the first portion of the novel, the autor offers the initial attempt at destroying the narrative/grammatical barriers which normally separate direct dialog from reported speech.

⁵ José Luis Martín, *La Narrativa de Vargas Llosa* (Madrid: Gredos, 1974), 156-71.

⁶ All quotes are taken from the single volume edition of Seix Barral, Barcelona, 1974.

By including in indirect reported discourse elements which distinctly identify a particular character or speech style, the passage offers a continuous transition between the level of direct speech and that of indirectly presented discourse. This contrast with the normal discrete jump between direct and indirect speech has been used by other writers for humorous effects; in *Conversación* it serves rather to create the effect of a novel totally dominated by voices, where even narrative descriptive passages are in a sense personified by fragments of direct speech.

Matilla Rivas,⁷ who chooses the somewhat misleading term "ellipsis" for the narrative techniques employed by Vargas Llosa, notes that:

Vargas Llosa desemboca en una realidad y su función dialéctica en tiempo y espacio, dando un rodeo que parte de él, penetra en el pasado novelístico, vuelve, y se dispara otra vez hacia atrás, terminando donde comenzó... significa una concentración de sentido estructural en cuanto a una de las técnicas más usuales en la novelística de todos los tiempos. En la tradicional, los planos están claramente limitados: actor-diálogo-autor, o, por un proceso de interiorización: evolucionan hasta constituir corrientes de pensamiento y muchas veces diálogo incorporado al tiempo del narrador, perdiendo temporalidad al ser atraídos y asimilados por el presente.

Moreno Turner⁸ observes similarly that "Característica es, en este sentido, la perspectiva múltiple e instantánea que se nos entrega por la incorporación a una misma secuencia narrativa de distintos planos temporales y espaciales."

⁷ Alfredo Matilla Rivas, "Conversación en la Catedral: estructura y estrategias," in *Homenaje a Mario Vargas Llosa*, ed. H. Giacomán and J. M. Oviedo (New York: Las Américas, 1971), pp. 69-97 [74].

⁸ Fernando Moreno Turner, "Conversación en la Catedral de Mario Vargas Llosa," in *Homenaje a Mario Vargas Llosa*, pp. 173-180 [177].

Near the beginning of the novel the author begins to rupture the purely linear chronological sequence of events, i.e. the actual conversation, with flashbacks to events thought or discussed by Santiago and Ambrosio. Chapter 2 of the first section begins directly in the past, relating incidents of Zavala's adolescence, a theme which recurs throughout the remainder of the novel. The entire structure of *Conversación* is in fact a series of short sketches representing different stages of Zavala's life, as well as the lives of his father, Cayo Bermúdez, and Ambrosio. However, no chronological hierarchy is obeyed in the portrayal of such biographical segments, and as in Vargas Llosa's earlier novels, the scene constantly shifts from present to past to present again, with various past points being touched upon apparently at random. Thus we have yet another instance in which the overall structure of the novel may be characterized as an overlapping or interpenetration of the paradigm onto the syntagm. Ordinarily, real time, or a single time line defined by the author, represents the paradigmatic basis underlying the chronological structure of a novel. In this particular work, however, the author presents, nearly simultaneously, a number of past events representing different chronological periods, so as to make the reader perceive the past not as a series of discrete segments, but rather as a simultaneous prismatic display of overlapping events. Such a technique represents merely a single layer in the linguistic labyrinth which Vargas Llosa has created.

Also beginning in Chapter 2 are fleeting references to the (novelistic) present moment, i.e. the conversation, in the midst of past narrative. This is done in an ingenious fashion, by having either Santiago or Ambrosio make a remark, in the course of the conversation, which logically completes a part of a past-tense narrative

currently in progress. For example (37) we find, during a description of a conversation between the youthful Santiago and his companion Popeye regarding the former’s sister, La Teté, the following exchange:

—Olvídate, no seas bobo —dijo Popeye—. A propósito de la Teté, ¿por qué no fue a la playa esta mañana?

—Se fue al Regatas con unas amigas —dijo Santiago—. No sé por qué no escarmientas.

—El coloradito, el de las pecas —dice Ambrosio—. El hijo del senador don Emilio Arévalo, claro. ¿Se casó con él?

—No me gustan los pecosos ni los pelirrojos —hizo una morisqueta la Teté—. Y él es las dos cosas. ¡Huy, qué asco!

—Lo que más me amarga es que la botaran por mi culpa —dijo Santiago.

Here we have in fact three separate chronological layers within the same apparently coherent passage: the discussion between Popeye and Santiago, the comments of Santiago’s sister, obviously made at a different time, and the conversation between Santiago and Ambrosio, where the events in question have apparently come up for comment. Rather than indirectly describing past events, Vargas Llosa has opted for a direct representation utilizing actual segments of dialog. Moreover, the textual continuity and coherence is effected not by chronological sequencing, but rather by an intricate series of verbal and pragmatic clues, which allow a temporally disconnected set of discourse to be interpreted as textually connected.

A further example of the same technique is (51-2):

—Te voy a hacer una pregunta —dice Santiago—. ¿Tengo cara de desgraciado?

—Y yo te voy a decir una cosa —dijo Popeye—. ¿Tú no crees que nos fue a comprar las “Coca-colas” de puro sapa? Como descolgándose, a ver si repetíamos lo de la otra noche.

—Tienes la mente podrida, pecoso —dijo Santiago.

—Pero qué pregunta —dice Ambrosio—. Claro que no, niño.

—Está bien, la chola es una santa y yo tengo la mente podrida —dijo Popeye—. Vamos a tu casa a oír discos. entonces.

—¿Lo hiciste por mí? —dijo don Fermín—. ¿Por mí, negro?

—Le juro que no, niño, se ríe Ambrosio—. ¿Se está haciendo la burla de mí?

In this passage we have once again three levels of chronological discourse: that of the conversation between Santiago and Ambrosio, that of the earlier conversation between Popeye and Santiago regarding the administering of an aphrodisiac to the Zavalas' maid, and the first reference to a confrontation between Fermín Zavala and Ambrosio, regarding the murder of the former mistress of Cayo Bermúdez, la Musa, who was attempting to blackmail Zavala because of his homosexual relations with Ambrosio. These three levels are interconnected by the apparently fortuitous coincidence of questions and answers: although pertaining to three successive chronological periods, each answer appears to be a direct response to the preceding question. The author has once again used a linguistic maneuver to turn a temporally disconnected text into a coherent narrative passage.

The interchange between Fermín Zavala and Ambrosio recurs at various points throughout the first and fourth sections of the novel, each time involving a variant of the same theme. The middle two sections, while at times making reference to Fermín and Ambrosio, relate the events directly, rather than through recourse to juxtapositions within a temporally distinct narrative segment. In the first section, however, the momentary flashbacks, never more than a single sentence long, and always appearing without textual signals in the expanse of another passage, create a startling effect, which nonetheless results in a gradual unfolding of this subplot,

the details of which are revealed in the two middle sections. The sole reference to this conversation appearing in section IV, after the events surrounding the encounter have already been explained, is a longer passage in which Fermín pays Ambrosio some money and sends him away; this flashback, unlike the earlier ones, occurs in the midst of a later description by Ambrosio to his wife of this same payoff. Thus the reference in the fourth section serves a distinct function, since in the final part of the novel it is no longer necessary to use the flashbacks to foreshadow subsequent explanations; rather they may be used to amplify observations contained in the narrative proper.

There remains a final usage of language in *Conversación* to be discussed, a device found at all points throughout the novel, and which acts to blur if not totally obliterate the normally distinct lines separating references to individual characters. The device referred to is the incorporation, into a single sentence containing indirect speech, of styles representing the speech of both of two characters maintaining a conversation. Thus (38):

Se codeaban, lo difícil era encontrar con quién, excitados, disforzados, ahí estaba la cosa, y la mesa y los milkshakes temblaban con los sacudones: qué locos eran flaco. ¿Qué le había dicho el Chispas al dársela? El Chispas y Santiago se llevaban como perro y gato y vez que podía el Chispas le hacía perradas al flaco y el flaco al Chispas perradas vez que podía: a lo mejor era una mala pasada de tu hermano, flaco. No, pecoso, el Chispas había llegado hecho una pascua a la casa.

The confused and embarrassed conversation between Popeye and Santiago is mirrored by the constantly shifting verbal reference among Santiago, Popeye, and the narrator, all in indirect style. As a variant, a question in direct dialog is frequently followed by an answer in an indirect style (38):

—¿Y qué vas a hacer? —susurró Popeye—. ¿Se la vas a dar a alguien o la vas a botar?

Había pensado botarla, pecoso, y Santiago bajó la voz y enrojció, después estuvo pensando y tartamudeó, ahí se le había ocurrido una idea. Sólo para ver cómo era, pecoso, qué le parecía.

—Una estupidez sin nombre, con cinco libras se pueden hacer mil cosas —dijo Popeye.

Popeye's question and later reply are presented in direct style, paralleling his outspoken nature with regard to the matter at hand. Santiago, on the other hand, is indecisive and evasive, and his vacillation and self-doubt are also reflected by the indirect dialog, presenting his remarks via a series of verbal convolutions.

By refusing to retain a single narrative identity throughout a supposedly coherent passage, Vargas Llosa in effect simultaneously presents the authorial alternatives which normally entail a mutual exclusion. This simultaneity is arrived at not through presenting lists of paradigmatic alternatives, but rather by rapid juxtapositions, as a color wheel turns discrete colored segments into a white blur when whirled rapidly enough.

Given the preceding observations, which, while exemplary are by necessity not exhaustive, it remains to synthesize them into a statement concerning the stylistic and literary effects of the author's verbal manipulations. Such a task, involving aesthetic and cultural judgments as well as mere linguistic acuity, is a difficult one indeed, and not one to be satisfactorily resolved in a single note. Therefore rather than a programmatic statement, the concluding remarks will focus on observations of a hypothetical nature.

As noted earlier, by presenting a paradigmatic array of narrative possibilities, Vargas Llosa is allowing the reader to be an active participant in the act of giving structure and interpretation to the novel. Rather than

merely passively imbibing a predigested format, the reader is forced, sometimes against his will, to constantly supply the structuring elements for himself, occasionally finding himself with more than one option at his disposal.

Aside from the direct purpose of presenting the reader with a number of variant perspectives, the use of paradigmatic interlacing of character structures appears to enjoy an additional link with the thematic significance of *Conversación*. By so structuring much of the dialog, both direct and reported, that it appears to emanate simultaneously from various persons, the author reinforces the feeling that all the characters share the same history and destiny, and are, in fact, mere satellites or outgrowths of a single macro-character. The interrelation of the individual characters through common memories, events and verbal references enables Vargas Llosa to drive home several of the basic themes of the novel, namely those of communication and individual destiny, or the lack thereof.

Conversación en la Catedral is characterized by an inability to sustain meaningful communication. Santiago Zavala constantly tries to communicate with his parents, but for different reasons in each case, finds himself repeatedly at cross-purposes with them. Cayo Bermúdez falls from power due to his inability to successfully communicate his ideas about governmental security to those around him. Ambrosio, as a result of unsuccessful communication with La Musa and Fermín Zavala, is led to kill the former and is banished by the latter. Santiago also loses the love of his university companion Aída to Jacobo, through the failure to communicate his feelings at the appropriate time. All these examples of infelicitous communication are reflected by the narrative structure itself, which continually starts and stops, without ever completing a coherent segment of narration,

thus making communication with the reader all the more difficult, and in turn suggesting the interrelations of the characters within the text.

Closely intertwined with the motif of communication is the theme of destiny and failure.⁹ Each of the protagonists of the novel has in a sense failed, and such failure appears in each case to be the result of an inexorable destiny. Santiago Zavala has abandoned his youthful ambitions to be a political figure or social reformer, and finds himself instead in a dead-end newspaper job, married to a former nurse. Cayo Bermúdez remains, despite his political position, a “cholo” to Peruvian high society, and after a brief moment of glory, is exiled from the country during a political struggle. Zavala’s former university companions, Aída and Jacabo, determined to reform Peru through the establishment of a communist society, eventually become pariahs, living on the edges of society and occasionally being jailed for their rather minor political activities. Ambrosio, after having been chauffeur for Fermín Zavala and Cayo Bermúdez, ends up, after a series of equally disastrous positions, working for the Lima dog pound. Fermín Zavala, caught in the middle of an unsuccessful attempt to overthrow the government, dies a broken man, and is remembered fondly only by Ambrosio. And so it goes, with these and other lesser characters of the novel, each of whom ultimately fails to achieve lasting personal success, and becomes nothing more than another minuscule square in the patchwork of Peruvian society.

In summary, it may therefore be affirmed that Vargas Llosa has deliberately, through the use of particular narrative structures, drawn up the form of his novel in

⁹ Cf. Wolfgang A. Luchting, “El fracaso como tema en Mario Vargas Llosa,” *Mundo Nuevo*, sept.-oct. 1970, 61-72.

such a manner as to suggest and reinforce certain elements of its content. The verbal maze into which the reader is drawn accurately mirrors the lives and actions of the characters of the novel, and a simpler linguistic structure would not have adequately portrayed the meaningless and absurd situation which is the human condition.

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