



## **Mario Vargas Llosa: Critical Essays on Characterization**

# Scripta Humanistica

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**R. A. Kerr**

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**For my parents**

**Paul L. Kerr (1917-1980) and Regina D. Kerr**

**and**

**(of course)**

**for**

**Annie**

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## Introduction

# Character at the Crossroads

Character is the driving force of fiction. --Leon Surmelian, Techniques of Fiction Writing

L'analyse structurale a eu la plus grand repugnance a traiter le personnage comme une essence...--Roland Barthes, "Introduction à l'analyse structurale des récits"

In Book Six of the Poetics, Aristotle states that "it is the action which is the object of imitation; the individual characters are subsidiary to it."<sup>1</sup> Until recently, this prescriptive analysis of the role of character in Drama and Epic has not been applicable to prose fiction. Homo fictus, in fact, has enjoyed high status as an essential component of modern narrative. Ian Watt's study of the early practitioners of the genre prompted him to observe that attention to characterization is an element that definitively separates the novel from its sister genres, and from its fictional predecessors: "the novel is surely distinguished from other genres and from previous forms of fiction by the amount of attention it habitually accords...to the individualization of its characters..."<sup>2</sup>

Throughout the nineteenth century, the great Age of the Novel, character portrayal remained a dominant element of

fictional narrative. In the era of protagonists such as Emma Bovary, Raskolnikov, and Anna Karenina, detailed, lifelike characterization was obligatory. The development of stream-of-consciousness techniques late in the century, and the subsequent influence of Freud, added the unprobed depths of the individual psyche to the novelist's store of resources for depicting protagonists. Internal exploration of character has been fruitfully and exhaustively explored by Proust, Joyce, Faulkner, and others.

Critical pronouncements of the early twentieth century attest to the power and significance of the role of character in fiction. Henry James ignored Aristotle and equated character with action: "Character in any sense that we can get at it, is action, and action is plot."<sup>3</sup> For James' follower, Percy Lubbock, the capable novelist is one who draws characters of flesh and blood: "Of Richardson and Tolstoy and Flaubert we can say at once that their command of life, their grasp of character, their knowledge of human affections and manner, had a certain range and strength and depth."<sup>4</sup> In the concluding pages of Mimesis, Erich Auerbach praises Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky primarily for their ability to depict character: "The most essential characteristic of the inner movement documented in Russian realism is the unqualified, unlimited and passionate intensity of experience in the characters portrayed."<sup>5</sup>

By mid-twentieth century, successful narrative technique had become nearly synonymous with successful character portrayal. Leon Surmelian's Techniques of Fiction Writing, for example, declares that "Character is the cornerstone of the novel, and we read novels primarily for their revelations of character."<sup>6</sup> Gilbert Chase prefaces The American Novel and Its Tradition with the accepted observation that in fiction, "Character is more important than action and plot...."<sup>7</sup>

Despite these assertions, a growing reaction to the preeminence of character developed. While Joyce and Proust labored to plumb the depths of the human psyche, and thus merge homo fictus with homo sapiens, Einstein was positing the total relativity of our perception of "reality." In the new physics, "absolute description of any object or area is impossible from a single point of reference. Each position which provides a perspective will reveal a different aspect of the subject of observation and contemplation..."<sup>8</sup>

In 1939, Jean Paul Sartre related this concept to fiction. In his essay, "M. François Mauriac et la liberté,"<sup>9</sup> Sartre mocks the feigned "lucidité divine du romancier"(44) who attempts to assume "le point de vue de Dieu sur ses personnages" (45). For the French thinker, philosophic and scientific relativism must be reflected in the novel: "la théorie de la relativité s'applique intégralement à la univers romanesque, que, dans un vrai roman,

pas plus que le mond d'Einstein, il n'y a de place pour un observateur privilégié" (56-57). For many writers, the uncertainties of the modern age were mirrored in the increasingly denatured characters that their works depicted. Kafka's K, Beckett's Molloy, and Maurice Blanchot's Thomas l'obscur are stunted caricatures of their nineteenth-century counterparts.

Critics of fiction were quick to recognize the winds of change. José Ortega y Gasset lamented the dehumanization of art in general and of the novel in particular: "Por todas partes salimos a lo mismo: Huída de la persona humana...Es muy difícil que a un contemporáneo menor de treinta años le interese un libro donde, so pretexto de arte, se le refieran las idas y venidas de unos hombres y mujeres."<sup>10</sup> Alain Robbe-Grillet, in contrast, celebrates the demise of the novel of character:

...les créateurs de personnages, au sens traditionnel ne réussissent plus à nous proposer que de fantoches auxquels eux-mêmes ont cessé de croire. Le roman de personnages appartient bel et bien au passé, il caractérise une époque: Celle que marquerapogée de l'individu.<sup>11</sup>

The Formalist-Structuralist school of criticism has carried the concept of the denatured character to its logical extreme. Seymour Chatman notes that Vladimir Propp, in his seminal study, The Morphology of the Russian Folktale, viewed prototypical fictional characters as "simply the products of their functions in

narratives."<sup>12</sup> Aristotle, in the Poetics, had posited the possibility of a drama without characters: "Without action there could be no tragedy, whereas a tragedy without characterization is possible."<sup>13</sup> Boris Tomachevski applied the Aristotelian argument to fictional narrative: "Le héros n'est guère nécessaire à la fable. La fable comme système de motifs peut entièrement se passer du héros et de ses traits caractéristiques."<sup>14</sup>

In 1964, Claude Bremond proposed "the extension of the findings of Propp to literary and artistic genres other than the fairy tale" (Chatman 59). The Structuralist conception of character in the novel is epitomized in the theories of A. J. Greimas. In Sémantique structurale,<sup>15</sup> he classifies characters not according to what they are, but according to what they do. To this end, he even divests character of its traditional name, preferring to refer to fictional personages as "actants". Most Structuralists agreed with this strategy, and perceived in the idea of character, "una peligrosa y desviada idea nacida por comodidad mental del lector y del crítico, un modo de referencia que oculta el verdadero mecanismo de su inserción en el relato."<sup>16</sup>

In part, the Formalist-Structuralist argument represented a reaction to traditional criticism's insistence that the novelist's principle task is the creation of flesh and blood characters that rival their parallels in the real world. Belief in the extremes of such criteria frequently resulted in the degeneration of the

critical activity into a series of commentaries in which the focus moves from the work itself to the subjective fringe. L. C. Knights has illuminated the pitfalls of the application of such requirements to the study of dramatic character in the aptly entitled essay, "How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?"<sup>17</sup>

While traditional criticism occasionally breaks down into such idle speculation, its antithetical alternative, the Formalist-Structuralist method, is equally flawed by its rigid reductionism. In his lucid essay on the subject, Seymour Chatman concludes that "Literary analysis is so much more than the fitting of units into categories that we must question whether any desire to develop elaborate systems genuinely contributes to a clearer understanding of the literary work of art " (78). Today there is a manifest need for a critical approach to character that can retain an interest in the motivations of protagonists while drawing on the experience of the system builders. Northrup Frye's "Theory of Modes,"<sup>18</sup> although essentially dependent upon Aristotelian notions of character,<sup>19</sup> is an intelligent example of the potentialities of this process. Elsewhere, a critical precedent was established through the utilization of a Latin American text as the basis for a theoretical analysis of character. Floyd Merrell's essay, "Communication and Paradox in Carlos Fuentes' La muerte de Artemio Cruz: Towards a Semiotics of Character,"<sup>20</sup> seeks to show that the choices that a character makes within a

work of fiction ultimately lead to paradoxes on a semantic and existential level. When viewed experimentally and from multiple critical perspectives, the traditional vantage point of character thus may provide fresh insights to textual analysis and contribute as well to the concept of a poetics of fiction.

The narrative works of Mario Vargas Llosa lend themselves particularly well to studies of this nature. His extensive literary production offers an ample body of material for investigation. Twenty-eight years after the publication of his first novel, he remains in the vanguard of major Latin American novelists. Among the myriad of technical experimentors who figure in the Latin American "Boom" and "post-Boom," perhaps none has been cited so frequently for a preoccupation with novelistic technique as has Vargas Llosa. This awareness of the role of structural experimentation, "su candente fe en los procedimientos técnicos y estéticos de la novela,"<sup>21</sup> is observed in his own critical studies, which range from general observations on novelistic technique, such as La novela,<sup>22</sup> to book-length studies on Flaubert<sup>23</sup> and García Márquez.<sup>24</sup> Vargas Llosa's narrative works continue to represent "uno de los nervios más vigorosos,"<sup>25</sup> of current Latin American fiction.

Early critical appraisals of Vargas' powers of characterization were largely uncomplimentary. Though few scholars devoted much time to close analysis, the prevailing view



was negative: "Sr. Vargas Llosa does not in fact attempt to delve too deeply into his characters or their relationships...his characters are often quite unconvincing."<sup>26</sup> Roslyn Frank, in her excellent study of the author's early works, concluded that in the portrayal of character, his narrative frequently displays an "opacidad inherente."<sup>27</sup> Referring to La ciudad y los perros, Luis A. Díez affirmed that "Few characters are delineated in any great depth."<sup>28</sup> Elsewhere, in a review of Pantaleón y las visitadoras, Martín Vilumara cited "lo inverosímil de la mayor parte de los personajes."<sup>29</sup> Luis Harss concluded that Vargas Llosa's narrative contains "no rounded characters."<sup>30</sup>

A few critics contested this view. Phillip Johnson found the protagonist of Conversación en la Catedral, Santiago Zavala, to be both "complex and multifaceted."<sup>31</sup> Alan Cheuse, commenting on the mythic dimension of Vargas Llosa's protagonists, asserted that the author's characters "survive in our memories (where all books finally live or die)."<sup>32</sup> More recent studies continue this trend. Both María Rodríguez-Lee's Juegos psicológicos en la narrativa de Mario Vargas Llosa (1984)<sup>33</sup> , and Roy C. Boland's Mario Vargas Llosa: Oedipus and the Papa State (1988)<sup>34</sup> , represent well this revisionist attitude in their concentration on Vargas Llosa's portrayal of the interiority of his characters and their social interrelationships.

Although the essays that follow continue in the tradition of Boland and Rodriguez-Lee, the critical approaches employed are at once less specific and more eclectic. Various dimensions of characterizatón and its interaction with other narrative elements from Los jefes (1958) to ¿Quién mató a Palomino Molero? (1986)<sup>35</sup> are analyzed from different critical perspectives, including reader-response theory, archetypal criticism, point-of-view theories, semiotics, structuralism, and approaches that incorporate elements of developmental psychology, rhetoric, onomastics, and theories of the role of place in fiction. Ultimately, however, it is the rich and complex fountainhead of Mario Vargas Llosa's fictional universe that has served as my definitive critical guidepost.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Aristotle, On Poetry and Style, trans. G. M. A. Grube, 11th ed. (New York: Bobbs Merrill Co., 1958) 14.

<sup>2</sup>Ian Watt, The Rise of the Novel, 8th ed. (Berkeley: U of California Press, 1974) 17-18.

<sup>3</sup>Henry James, "Anthony Trollope," in Theory of Fiction: Henry James, ed. James E. Miller (Lincoln: U of Nebraska Press, 1972): 22.

<sup>4</sup>Percy Lubbock, The Craft of Fiction, 11th ed. (New York: The Viking Press, 1973) 4-5.

<sup>5</sup>Erich Auerbach, Mimesis, trans. Willard Trask, 4th ed. (Princeton UP, 1974) 522-23.

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- <sup>6</sup>Leon Surmelian, Techniques of Fiction Writing (New York: Anchor Books, 1969) 140.
- <sup>7</sup>Gilbert Chase, The American Novel and Its Tradition (New York: Doubleday 1957) 12.
- <sup>8</sup>Sharon Spencer, Space, Time and Structure in the Modern Novel (New York: New York UP 1971) xvii.
- <sup>9</sup>Jean Paul Sartre, "M. Françoise Mauriac et la liberté," in Situations I (Paris: Libraire Gallimard, 1947):36-57.
- <sup>10</sup>José Ortega y Gasset, "La deshumanización del arte," Obras completas, III, 5th ed. (Madrid: Revista de Occidente, 1962): 372.
- <sup>11</sup>Alaine Robbe-Grillet, Pour un nouveau roman (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1963) 28.
- <sup>12</sup>Seymour Chatman, "On the Formalist-Structuralist Theory of Character," Journal of Literary Semantics, 1 (1972): 55. See Vladimir Propp, The Morphology of the Russian Folktale, trans. Laurence Scott, 2nd ed. (Austin: U of Texas Press, 1968) 25-26.
- <sup>13</sup>Aristotle, On Poetry and Style, 59.
- <sup>14</sup>Boris Tomachevski, "Thématique," in Théorie de la littérature, ed. and trans. Tzvetan Todorov (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1965) 296.
- <sup>15</sup>Algirdas J[ulien] Greimas, Sémantique structurale: Recherche de méthode (Paris: Libraire Larousse, 1966).
- <sup>16</sup>Raúl Castagnino, 'Sentido' y estructura narrativa (Buenos Aires: Editorial Nova, 1975) 77.
- <sup>17</sup>L. C. Knights, "How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?," in Explorations (New York: George W. Stewart, 1947):15-54.
- <sup>18</sup>Northrup Frye, "Historical Criticism: Theory of Modes," in Anatomy of Criticism, 3rd ed. (Princeton: Princeton UP 1973) 36-67.
- <sup>19</sup>Frye's categories are determined solely on the basis of a character's power of action within a literary work.
- <sup>20</sup>Floyd Merrel, "Communication and Paradox in Carlos Fuentes' La muerte de Artemio Cruz: Towards a Semiotics of Character," Semiótica, 18 (1976): 339-60.
- <sup>21</sup>José Luis Martín, La narrativa de Vargas Llosa (Madrid: Editorial Gredos, 1974) 62.
- <sup>22</sup>Mario Vargas Llosa, La novela (Montevideo: Fundación de Cultura Universitaria, 1968).
- <sup>23</sup>Mario Vargas Llosa, La orgía perpetua: Flaubert y Madame Bovary (Madrid: Taurus Ediciones, 1975).
- <sup>24</sup>Mario Vargas Llosa, Gabriel García Márquez: historia de un deicidio (Barcelona: Monte Avila Editores, 1971).
- <sup>25</sup>Martín 40.