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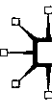
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Edited by
Juan E. De Castro
and Nicholas Birns

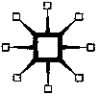


VARGAS LLOSA AND
LATIN AMERICAN POLITICS

Edited by Juan E. De Castro and Nicholas Birns

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1. An early draft of Chapter 5, "Mario Vargas Llosa, the Fabulist of Queer Cleansing," by Paul Allatson, was first published as "Historia de Miquel: A Fable of Queer Cleansing" in *Revista de Estudios Hispánicos* 32.3 (Oct. 98): 511–35. An early version of Chapter 8, "Sex, Politics, and High Art: Vargas Llosa's Long Road to *The Feast of the Goat*," by Gene H. Bell-Villada, was published as "The Inventions and Reinventions of Mario Vargas Llosa," in *Salmagundi* 153/154 (Winter 2007): 148–57.

9. For elaborations of this bodily economy, see Allatson.
10. Vargas Llosa's own 1981 account of this prison is contained in "Una visita a Lurigancho."
11. A literal translation of the Spanish original of this phrase is "the rectum, festering, gangrened, with cancer."

CHAPTER 6

GOING NATIVE

ANTI-INDIGENISM IN VARGAS LLOSA'S THE STORYTELLER AND DEATH IN THE ANDES

IGNACIO LÓPEZ-CALVO

IN 2005, PERUVIAN WRITER MARIO VARGAS LLOSA RECEIVED FROM the American Enterprise Institute, one of the premier right-wing think tanks, the Irving Kristol Award. He opened his reception speech by thanking his hosts for seeing him as a "unified being," in contrast with many of his Hispanic critics who tend to separate his literary work from his political views. In light of the author's statement, in this essay I shall contextualize the representation of indigeneity and indigenism in his fiction with the evolution of his political thought. As Efraín Kristal reminds us, according to Vargas Llosa's "doctrine of the demons of artistic creation, a writer is not responsible for his literary themes, and his personal convictions may contradict the contents and messages of his literary works" (*Temptation of the Word* 197). Nevertheless, as we shall see, there is an ideological common ground between the novels considered in this essay and the author's political thought at the time he published them even if, as can be expected of the novelistic genre, in the fictional discourse we can often find polyphonic contradictions and ethical ambivalence.

The Chinese-Peruvian author Siu Kam Wen, in his autobiographical novel *Viaje a Icaza* (*Voyage to Ithaca*, 2004), comments on how Vargas Llosa's political image during his 1989 campaign for the following year's presidential elections was widely seen as white-oriented and elitist. Among other political mistakes, he argues, the famed author and inexperienced politician "formed alliances with worn-out parties and discredited politicians when it would have been more sensible to run by himself; he

recruited his running mates and technical advisers from among the white elite, thus alienating the indigenous and mestizo majority of the population" (19). This last sentence brings us back to Vargas Llosa's request that critics see him as "a unified being." How do his perceived political stance and his statements as an intellectual translate into the novelistic representation of indigeneity and indigenism? In a recent article, Vargas Llosa expresses his concern for the oppression of indigenous people and shows, as he has always done, his compassion for their plight. Concomitantly, in direct contrast with the tenets of various versions of Peruvian indigenist discourse, he endorses *mestizaje* (mixing of races) as the solution to Latin America's social ills, regardless of the danger it poses to their cultural specificity: "Fortunately, the mixing of races (*el mestizaje*) is very extensive. It builds bridges between these two worlds, drawing them closer and slowly merging them . . . In the long run it will win out, giving Latin America a distinctive profile as a mestizo continent. Let's hope it doesn't homogenize it completely and deprive it of its nuances, though this seems neither possible nor desirable in the century of globalization and interdependence among nations" ("Latin America" 34).

In this same article, he goes on to explain that whereas, for indigenists, the genuine reality of Latin America resides in pre-Hispanic civilizations and indigenous people, he believes that, culturally, Latin America is an intrinsic part of the Western world and that, after five centuries of inhabitation, nonindigenous Latin Americans are as native to the continent as indigenous people: "The fact is that Latin America is Spanish, Portuguese, Indian, African all at once, and a few other things as well . . . Five centuries after the Europeans set foot on the continent's beaches, mountain chains and jungles, Latin Americans of Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, German, Chinese, and Japanese origin are as native to the continent as those whose ancestors were the ancient Aztecs, Toltecs, Mayas, Quechuas, Aymaras and Caribs" ("Latin America" 35-36).

From this perspective, how is Vargas Llosa's political opposition to indigenism reflected in his fiction? As we shall see, some of his novels offer a rather ambiguous and ambivalent rendering of indigeneity. Paradoxically, in his book of essays *A Writer's Reality* (1991) he criticizes the writings of Jorge Luis Borges (an author who, incidentally, he admires deeply) for their cultural ethnocentricity: "The black, the Indian, the primitive often appear in his stories as inferiors, wallowing in a state of barbarism apparently unconnected either to the accidents of history or to society, but inherent in the race or status. They represent a lower humanity, shut off from what Borges considers the greatest of all human qualities, intellect and literary refinement" (18). Vargas Llosa believes that the Argentine

writer's discrimination toward so-called third world cultures was unconscious: "Those other cultures that form part of Latin America," he insists, "the native Indian and the African, feature in Borges's world more as a contrast than as different varieties of mankind" (18). After reading these statements, one cannot help but wonder: does not Vargas Llosa's fiction suffer from a similar ethnocentric tendency to associate Andean and Amazonian indigenous beliefs with barbarism? To answer this question, I shall concentrate on two novels published after he had rejected socialism and turned his political convictions toward neoliberal free-market economics: *The Storyteller* (1987), and *Death in the Andes* (1993).

In *La utopía arcaica* (The Archaic Utopia, 1996), a study of the birth of the indigenist movement through the life and works of José María Arguedas, Vargas Llosa expresses his admiration for this Peruvian writer who, as a professional anthropologist and a person who grew up surrounded by indigenous culture, enjoyed the benefits of being an expert in the two main realities of Peru, the Indian and the white-mestizo: "Privileged because in a country split in two worlds, two languages, two cultures, two historical traditions, he knew both realities intimately, in their misery and greatness, and, therefore, had a much wider perspective of our country than mine and most Peruvian writers" (9). In spite of this modest acknowledgment of his own limitations (which he also confesses in the first chapter of *A Writer's Reality*), Vargas Llosa, in the two novels mentioned previously, faces the challenge of following in Arguedas's footsteps and exploring Peru's violent race relations in this clash between "modern" Western on one hand and "traditional," indigenous cultures on the other. Before he published *The Storyteller*, however, there were occasional glimpses of this interest (which would eventually become one of his literary "demons") in two previous novels: *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* (1977) and *The Real Life of Alejandro Mayta* (1984). Referring to *Aunt Julia*, Peruvian critic Antonio Cornejo Polar notices how the autobiographical narrator is so surprised by the changes brought about by rural migration to Lima in the ten years he has been absent that he feels like a tourist in his own city:

On leaving the Biblioteca Nacional around noon I would walk down the Avenida Abancay, which was beginning to turn into an enormous market of itinerant peddlers. On the sidewalks a dense crowd of men and women, many of them dressed in ponchos and peasant skirts, sold the most heterogeneous collection of wares imaginable . . . This Avenida Abancay was one of the thoroughfares in Lima that had changed the most. Jam-packed now and possessed and possessed of a distinct Andean

flavor, a street on which it was not rare to hear Quechua spoken amid the strong odor of fried food and pungent seasonings. (361)

Cornejo Polar underscores the contrast evident in this passage between the quiet library where written Spanish language predominates, a symbol of the lettered city (Angel Rama's *ciudad letrada*), and the noisy indigenous market that surrounds it, where written Spanish has been replaced by oral Quechua. At the same time, there is another implicit opposition: order versus the "indomitable plebeian disorder of the streets, which is seen explicitly and repeatedly as Andean" (837). In more simple terms, the protagonist finds himself surrounded by the ethnic Other in his own city.

A similar passage will surface seven years later in *The Real Life of Alejandro Mayta*, in which the unnamed and semiautobiographical first-person narrator (who is gathering information about a former revolutionary pioneer named Alejandro Mayta in order to write a novel about the first socialist insurrection in Peru) wonders, "From time to time I have the impression that I'm not in Lima or even on the coast but in some village in the Andes: sandals, Indian skirts, ponchos, vests with llamas embroidered on them, dialogues in Quechua. Do they really live better in this sink and scum than in the mountain villages they have abandoned to come to Lima? Sociologists, economists, and anthropologists assure us that, as amazing as it may seem, this is the case" (53). This passage seems ambivalent at best. Its first sentence gives the impression that the narrator is not only surprised but also disturbed by the omnipresence of indigenous people in "his" city; it is implied that this people do not belong in Lima but in their ancestral homeland in the Andes. In the next two sentences, however, he somewhat redeems himself by expressing his sympathy for their trials.

And the imagery reappears again in *The Storyteller* when the semiautobiographical narrator sees an Andean boy cleaning the filthy floor of a café: "A zombie? A caricature? Would it have been better for him to have stayed in his Andean village, wearing a wool cap with earflaps, leather sandals, and a poncho, never learning Spanish? I didn't know, and I still don't. But Mascarina knew" (27). These scenes in the three novels are reminiscent of the "informal Peru" or "Chicha culture" that Vargas Llosa describes in *La utopía arcáica* in derogatory terms that emphasize the confusion and lack of harmony of the hybridization. In the last chapter of this study, he mentions the unexpected results of the deindustrialization and forced cohabitation produced by Andean migration to the capital: "A strange hybrid in which the rudimentary Spanish or Creolized jargon that people use to communicate reflects a taste, a sensitivity, an idiosyncrasy, and even aesthetic values that are virtually new: a Chicha culture" (331–32)

These two ethnic realities are inseparably linked to Peruvian geographical locations. In *La utopía arcáica* Vargas Llosa includes a quotation from an indigenist academic essay titled *Ruta cultural del Perú* (Cultural Route of Peru), by the historian Luis E. Valcárcel, which the novelist considers an example of the "Andeanist" perception of Lima: "In the long run, the coast, because of its geographic location and its social composition, came to represent the Anti-Peru" (169). This passage is also representative of the archaic utopia initiated by El Inca Garcilaso de la Vega, who claimed that Quechua culture would be metaphysically preserved throughout the centuries, waiting for the appropriate moment to restore, in modern times, the Incas' egalitarian society. This indigenist "historical-political fiction" (in Vargas Llosa's terms; *Utopía* 168) is echoed in the fictional discourse of a character in *Mayta*, a twenty-two-year-old second lieutenant jailer named Vallejos who leaves Lima outside the essence of Peruvianness: "Mayta then heard him launch, with no preamble, into the discourse about Indian life. The real Peru was in the mountains and not along the coast, among the Indians and condors and the peaks of the Andes, not here in Lima, a foreign, lazy, anti-Peruvian city, because from the time the Spaniards had founded it, it had looked toward Europe and the United States and turned its back on Peru" (19). Vallejos will expand his argumentation in chapter 5: "Then, when Lima snatched the scepter from it, Jaúja, like all the cities and cultures of the Andes, went into an irreversible decline and servitude, subordinate to that new center of national life set in the most unhealthy corner of the coast, from which it would go on ceaselessly expropriating all the energies of the country for its own use" (116). These statements by the leftist lieutenant, together with the revolutionaries' efforts to "save" indigenous Peruvians and bring them back to a position of national leadership, are later satirically refuted and mocked through the passive reaction of Jaúja's inhabitants to the parade of the minuscule group of adolescent insurgents: "When people did turn to look at them, it was with indifference. A group of Indians with ponchos and packs, sitting on a bench, just followed them with their eyes. There weren't people for a demonstration yet. It was ridiculous to be marching" (232). A few pages later, the same indifferent reaction to the presence of their "saviors" further ridicules the insurgents' sacrifice: "In the plaza, the Indians went on buying and selling, uninterested in them" (254).

Therefore, even though, to Vargas Llosa's dismay, most critics have interpreted *Mayta* as a fictionalized political treatise against socialist revolutions and political utopias, there is also a subtle incubation against indigenist discourses (by which I do not mean that the novel or Vargas Llosa are anti-indigenous) that will be later developed in more depth in

The Storyteller and *Death in the Andes*. In the same way that *La utopía arcada* criticizes José Carlos Mariátegui's appropriation of the Indian plight to justify the Marxist theorist's own political objectives (without his knowing much about their culture) *Mayra* condemns, in an implicit way, the revolutionaries' flagrant attempt to use indigenous people in order to materialize their own political utopias, even as they pusillanimously hide out in their garage when the opportunity to take the arms arises. Although their attitude changes following the triumph of the Cuban Revolution at first *Mayra's* fellow Trotskyist militants choose to continue with their byzantine discussions instead of joining the uprising (which they had ostensibly been planning for years) alongside the indigenous people in the Andes. Yet all of them are convinced that indigenous people hold the key for the success of a socialist revolution: "When the Indians rise up, Peru will be a volcano" (12), *Mayra* promises. Only Vallejos and a somewhat reluctant *Mayra* eventually join the armed struggle, even though the latter awowedly knows nothing about Indians or their way of life. In a sort of poetic justice (which, according to *A Writer's Reality*, faithfully echoes the life of the historical Vicente *Mayra* Mercado), the last chapter shows him living a miserable life in a slum and laboring in an ice cream parlor.

Moving on to the novels specifically dedicated to the clash and lack of communication between the two main Peruvian cultures, in *The Storyteller* we have one of these indigenists: an idealistic, half-Jewish student from Lima's San Marcos University named Saúl "Mascarcia" Zuraras who, after doing anthropological fieldwork in the Amazonian jungle, decides to join "the men who walk"—that is, the nomadic Machiguenga tribe. That *The Storyteller* is sympathetic toward the Amazonian Indians is suggested by the novel being dedicated to them. Yet it takes for granted (since both Mascarcia and the narrator agree) that the assimilation of Andean Peruvians to Western culture is inevitable and even advisable. Thus Mascarcia states, "I know very well that there's no turning back for the descendants of the Incas. The only course left them is integration. The sooner they can be Westernized, the better: it's a process that's bogged down halfway and should be speeded up. For them, it's the lesser evil now. So you see I'm not being utopian. But in Amazonia it's different. The great trauma that turned the Incas into a people of sleepwalkers and vassals hasn't occurred there" (100).

By contrast, in the case of the Amazonian tribes the dilemma is presented, in line with postmodern skepticism, from two contrasting perspectives, neither of which is clearly defended within the novel. This is reflected in the fact that the conundrum remains somewhat unresolved in the book. In a first reading, it seems that Vargas Llosa lets the reader

decide on her own which of the two arguments seems more appropriate for Peru: Mascarcia's indigenist return to a pre-Colombian way of life, which, as Gene Bell-Villada points out, is "portrayed as something of an eccentric, utopian impulse" (150), or the Westernizing approach of his unnamed novelist-narrator, who no longer believes in socialist indigenism.¹ However, a second reading reveals that this would-be dialogical and polyphonic *tour de force* that takes place in 1958 between the neoindigenist Mascarcia and the ostensibly anti-indigenist first-person narrator is stacked. Inevitably, the fact that the narrator has autobiographical traits gives more weight to the second option. In O'Bryan-Knight's words, "As the narrator's voice breaks away from and begins to overpower that of the *hablador*, stylization gives way to critical parody. The voice of ethnography is ultimately subverted when it becomes clear that it is not a Machiguenga storyteller who is speaking out but, rather, the narrator speaking through Mascarcia's mouth. Indeed, Mascarcia emerges as a parody of an anthropologist" (90). Furthermore, the three odd-numbered chapters narrated in a style that imitates indigenous orality expose negative aspects of this culture.² The credibility of this criticism is enhanced by the fact that it comes from an anthropology student who obviously empathizes with the Machiguenga and now sees their culture from within.

Yet the impossibility of completely abandoning Western ways is proven by the fact that Mascarcia resorts to adapted versions of written texts, such as the plight of the biblical Jews and his favorite story, Franz Kafka's "The Metamorphosis" (1916). Mascarcia's adoption of the Machiguenga worldview has not completely erased the written culture he learned in Lima. As Raymond L. Williams puts it, "Rather than an authentic storyteller, he is the perfect imitator of the storyteller" (262). In any case, Mascarcia has found his destiny living as an *hablador* (storyteller) in the Amazonian jungle and trying to convince the Machiguenga, from this privileged vantage point, about the dangers of changing their ancestral customs. In the last chapter, for example, he warns them against abandoning their traditional nomadic life and trading with the *Vrtaochas* (non-Indians) through the story of a Machiguenga man who has joined up with the mercantile economy that, in his view, is so detrimental for the Amazonian tribes. Soon, this Machiguenga man becomes unhappy and begins to suspect that the whites with whom he has been trading products are devils. Tormented and suffering from insomnia, he regrets having committed the mistake of deviating from Machiguenga rules and moves with his family elsewhere, leaving all those "impure" objects behind.

Another element of Vargas Llosa's criticism of indigenism is his accusation against the movement of being openly male chauvinistic. In *La utopía*

arelica Vargas Llosa provides examples of stereotypical representations of masculinity and femininity, including Valcárcel's foretelling, in *Temporada en los Andes* (Tempest in the Andes, 1927), of the eventual hegemony of the "virtue sierra" over the "feminine coast" (68). In *The Storyteller*, this machismo is transplanted to the Machiguenga themselves. Mishla Koko-tovic has argued that "for Vargas Llosa, the Machiguenga are just a vehicle for a story about the importance of stories, and of storytelling" (182). Yet they also serve perhaps more important function: they illustrate the backward gender discrimination that, according to Vargas Llosa, permeates Amazonian indigenous cultures. Thus the Machiguenga man who had been trading with the Viracocha loses his temper and strikes one of his wives after accusing her of being a liar when she is obviously telling the truth. The deplorable situation of women in the Amazonia is also emphasized in the following passage: "What I gave them is worth more than she is," he assured me. "Isn't that so?" he asked the Yaminahua woman in front of me, and she agreed" (110). The girl, who was purchased from a Yaminahua family in exchange for some food, has not yet had her first menstruation. These passages can be interpreted in the context of feminist political philosopher Susan Moller Okin's criticism of multiculturalism in the sense that "culture" and the concern for preserving cultural diversity should never be an excuse for allowing the oppression of women and ignoring gender discrimination in minority cultures:

In the case of a more patriarchal minority culture in the context of a less patriarchal majority culture, no argument can be made on the basis of self-respect or freedom that the female members of the culture have a clear interest in its preservation. Indeed, they *might* be much better off if the culture into which they were born were either to become extinct (so that its members would become integrated into the less sexist surrounding culture) or, preferably, to be encouraged to alter itself so as to reinforce the equality of women—at least to the degree to which this value is upheld in the majority culture. (Okin 22–23)

In any case, this is another controversial argument. While the scene may describe the situation of women among the Machiguenga, this type of discrimination cannot be generalized to all indigenous Peruvian cultures. The status of women in pre-Columbian societies, for instance, varied greatly according to the ethnic group, as revealed by the archaeological discovery in 1991 of several tombs of high-level Mochica priestesses in San José de Moro, in the department of La Libertad on the northern coast of Peru. Likewise, the discovery in 2005 of a mummified Moche woman with complex tattoos in her arms, baptized the Lady of Cao, at

the Huaca Cao Viejo, part of the El Brujo archeological site on the outskirts of Trujillo, has also raised many questions about the role of women in the ancient civilizations of Peru, as it contained precious ornamental and military artifacts, including war clubs and spear throwers.

The novel, therefore, suggests that Peru should never try to return to what Vargas Llosa seems to consider the archaic and backward indigenous ways. The semiautobiographical narrator himself makes this assumption explicit when he lightheartedly accuses his classmate Mascariita: "You're an Indigenist to the nth degree, Mascariita," I teased him. "Just like the ones in the thirties. Like Dr. Luis Valcárcel when he was young, wanting all the colonial churches and convents demolished because they represented Anti-Peru. Or should we bring back the Tahuantinsuyo? Human sacrifice, quipus, repanation with stone knives?" (99). In this regard, it is worth noting that he presents repanation as backward when, considering the century when it was practiced, most anthropologists consider it proof of the scientific sophistication of Inca and pre-Inca societies. For instance, in a recent survey of pre-Columbian technology and science, Rómulo Lins and Marcos Teixeira argue that "the medical and botanical knowledge of the Inca was substantial and, in some cases, quite sophisticated for the time," singling out repanation as an example of such medical sophistication (627).

The narrator provides many other reasons to consider these tribes' culture inferior, including their polygamy, animism, head shrinking, and witch doctoring with tobacco: "The fact, for instance, that the Aguarunas and the Huambisas of the Alto Marañón tear out their daughters' hymen at her menarche and eat it, that slavery exists in many tribes, and in some communities they let the old people die at the first signs of weakness, on the pretexts that their souls have been called away and their destiny fulfilled . . . That babies born with physical defects, lame, maimed, blind, with more or fewer fingers than usual, or a harelip, were killed by their own mothers, who threw them in the river or buried them alive" (25). This last part is particularly relevant if one takes into account that had Mascariita been born a Machiguenga, his own mother would have killed him after seeing the birthmark that covers half of his face. Underscoring the paradox, Mascariita himself admits that this is in fact what would have happened to him and actually criticizes this barbaric custom. For this reason, he saves a parrot that his mother was trying to kill because it had been born with physical handicaps. Among several other anti-indigenist arguments used by the narrator to support indirectly the colonization of the Amazonian jungle is the small number of indigenous people that live there. In accord with Vargas Llosa's well-known epigraph that opens this essay, the narrator argues,

That in order not to change the way of life and the beliefs of a handful of tribes still living, many of them, in the Stone Age, the rest of Peru abstain from developing the Amazon region? Should sixteen million Peruvians renounce the natural resources of three-quarters of their national territory so that seventy or eighty thousand Indians could quietly go on shooting at each other with bows and arrows, shrinking heads and worshipping boat constructors? . . . 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 ethnologists' most detested word, become acculturated—well, there was no way around it. (21–22).

In the narrator's opinion, instead of worrying so much about the future of the few thousand Indians that belong to these small and primitive Amazonian tribes, Mascariita should concentrate on the predicament of the millions of Andean Indians.

At any rate, the narrator argues that Mascariita's indigenism (and indigenism in general, for that matter) is an archaic, romantic, unrealistic, and antihistorical utopia. At one point, he actually maintains that assimilation to Western ways would also be desirable for Amazonian tribes: "Was going on living the way they were, the way purist anthropologists of Saul's sort wanted them to do, to the tribes' advantage? Their primitive state made them, rather, victims of the worst exploitation and cruelty" (73–74).

Other scenes in the novel corroborate his intuition that assimilation is the only solution to the exploitation of indigenous tribes. In one of them, Jum, the *cacique* (local authority) of Urakusa, realizes (after his contacts with Western civilization while taking a course to become a bilingual teacher) that the men with whom they trade rubber and animal skins are exploiting his tribe. When the white or Amazonian mestizos with whom he trades find out that he has set up a cooperative between the indigenous villages, they brutally torture him. Upon seeing these abuses, the narrator recalls his debates about the colonization of the Amazonia with Mascariita and wonders, "Would he admit that in a case like this it was quite obvious that what was to Urakusa's advantage, to Jum's, was not going backward but forward? That is to say, getting up their own cooperative, trading with the towns, prospering economically and socially so that it would no longer be possible to treat them the way the 'civilized' people of Santa María de Nieva had done" (76). In line with the polyphonic approach of the novel, however, an alternative interpretation is subsequently offered:

Matos Mar thought that Jum's misfortune would provide Mascariita with further arguments to support his theory. Didn't the entire episode prove that coexistence was impossible, that it led inevitably to the Viracochas'

domination of the Indians, to the gradual and systematic destruction of the weaker culture? Those savage drunkards from Santa María de Nieva would never, under any circumstances, lead the inhabitants of Urakusa on the path of modernization, but only to their extinction; their "culture" had no more right to hegemony than that of the Aguarunas, who, however primitive they might be, had at least developed sufficient knowledge and skill to coexist with Amazonia. (77)

Regarding this argumentation presented by Vargas Llosa in both his novels and his political discourse, Kokorovic has questioned the author's thesis that preservation is the only alternative to modernization: "The very terms in which the dilemma is posed predetermine its resolution. Vargas Llosa sets up a false dichotomy by opposing Western modernization to the straw man of 'cultural preservation,' by which he means literally freezing 'primitive' indigenous cultures in time. Having thus limited the options he skips 'from choices the Indians face to choosing for them,' to use Doris Sommer's felicitous phrase" (177). As Kokorovic contends, indigeneity is not incompatible with modernity and, therefore, does not have to be necessarily replaced and sacrificed by the hegemonic Western culture; instead, a transculturation process can bring about Arguedas's ideal of a modern but not acculturated or Westernized Quechua culture.

In spite of his obsession with the figure of the Machiguenga storyteller, the narrator, who admittedly struggles to accept that these primitive cultures are part of his country, continues to find reasons for the modernization of the Amazonia. Unlike his friend Mascariita, he initially applauds the work that the Schnells, a couple of religious North American linguists, are doing with the Machiguengas. Because of this external influence, half of the five thousand Machiguengas now live in a village, have become Christian, and even have a *cacique*. As a result, their moral disintegration and helplessness, which made them refuse to take care of themselves once they fell ill, has now disappeared. A few lines later, however, the polyphonic counterpoint returns and he begins to have some doubts: "Was all this a good thing? Had it brought them real advantages as individuals, as people, as the Schnells so emphatically maintained? Or were they, rather, from the free and sovereign 'savages' they had been, beginning to turn into 'zombies,' caricatures of Westerners, as Mascariita had put it?" (163).

In the book he is writing, the novelist-narrator imagines that Mascariita, the born-again storyteller, has internalized the Machiguengas' superstitious and magico-religious interpretation of the reality. His opinions, therefore, now come from within the indigenous culture. But even before he becomes a Machiguenga, he contests the narrator's observations by

providing his own arguments against the colonization of the Amazonia. One of them is based on his disparagement of Lima's Andean Indians. Looking at them, Mascaria insists that Amazonian tribes should never follow in the footsteps of their Andean brethren in the capital city: "Or do you believe in 'civilizing the savages,' pal? How? By making soldiers of them? By putting them to work on the farms as slaves to Creoles like Fidel Pereira? By forcing them to change their language, their religion, and their customs, the way the missionaries are trying to do? What's to be gained by that? Being able to exploit them more easily, that's all. Making them zombies and caricatures of men, like those semiacculturated Indians you see in Lima" (26). In Mascaria's view, even though we may find some Amazonian customs cruel and offensive, aboriginal cultures should be respected. And the only way to do that, he argues, is to avoid contact with them. For centuries, he explains, their beliefs and traditions have helped them to survive in the jungle, to repel numerous colonization attempts (by Incas, then colonial missionaries, *criollos* [Euro-Peruvians] and, more recently, by anthropologists), and most importantly, to live in harmony with nature.

In spite of their discrepancies, the narrator and Mascaria are equally patriotic; both of them want the best for their homeland and, at one point or another, show sincere concern for the autochthonous tribes' adversity. Yet whereas Mascaria proposes to save the Machiguenga and their culture by isolating them, the narrator has more of an ethnological interest in them. His literary interests account for his fascination with their *habladores*: "They're a tangible proof that storytelling can be something more than entertainment," it occurred to me to say to him. "Something primordial, something that the very existence of a people may depend on. Maybe that's what impressed me so" (94). This passage is crucial to understand the common background behind the works considered in this essay. What the narrator has actually discovered here is that fictions are something that humans cannot live without. This need for fiction may account for oral storytelling and novels, or it may have a darker side: racists and fanatics of all kinds, including religious fundamentalists and members of terrorist groups such as Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path), may very well end up believing the bizarre fictions (ideological utopias) they have fabricated to justify their crimes. And in the author's mind, indigenists, behind their ostensibly good intentions, may also create their own dangerous ideological fictions. Vargas Llosa has formulated these views in *A Writer's Reality*: "One day I reached this conclusion: that ideology in Latin America was fulfilling this task for many people; that ideology was the way they incorporated fiction into their lives, as other people

incorporated the fictitious experience through fiction, through novels, or through religious ideas" (149). Even though in this passage, the author is referring mostly to political ideology in *Mayra*, one can easily conclude that he considers indigenist discourse just another fiction, another imagined world, another fantasy fabricated by Peruvian academics.

In *The Storyteller* we find the opinions of a character that has been partially invented by another, twenty-five years after the events took place. This invention contributes to the creation of a set of ambiguities that, in postmodernist fashion, eliminates the need for an epistemological center. Likewise, the additional interpretations provided by other characters (interviewees in *Mayra's* case), some of whom may be lying or may suffer lapses of memory, create a perspectivism with differing and at times contrasting views of the same facts. To complicate things even further, in both works the novelist-narrator is not as interested in unearthing the historical truth as he is in creating a fictional story and a protagonist with verisimilitude; if those events could have happened, that is all that matters. Thus, in *The Storyteller*, after the narrator speculates about possible reasons for his classmate's obsession with safeguarding aboriginal culture, he realizes that he will never find out what they are and chooses instead to invent them and make them part of a novel. Kristal has analyzed this ventriloquist narrative device: "The narrator chooses to identify the individual in the photograph as Mascaria . . . but because he only does so in the last pages of the novel the resolution of the mystery coincides with the reader's retrospective realization that the novelist's recollections are intertwined with his fictional inventions. The novel is a Borgesian game of Chinese boxes: the story of Mascaria's integration into the world of the Machiguenga is a fiction of the unnamed novelist whose obsession with Mascaria is a fiction of Vargas Llosa's" (*Temptation of the Word* 159). The reason Vargas Llosa used this narrative device is revealed in *A Writer's Reality* when he is actually explaining the creative process of his novel *The Green House* (1966): "I wanted to have an Indian character, a primitive man from a small tribe in the Amazon region, as the central figure in the novel. I tried hard to invent this character from within in order to show the reader his subjectivity, how he had assimilated some kind of experiences with the white world. But I could not do it . . . I felt I was making a caricature of this character and finally decided to describe him through intermediaries, through characters whom I was able to divine and to perceive" (19).

All these factors suggest, in a very postmodern way, the difficulty of reconstructing historical facts and of taking sides on delicate issues such as indigenism or revolutionary activities without falling into simplistic

conclusions. It is not too difficult, however, to read between the lines and infer the negative views about socialism and indigenism that permeate *Mayra* and *The Storyteller*. Both discourses are discredited not only as anachronistic and naïve fictions but also as dangerous ideologies. In other words, they try to uncover the naïve and perhaps innocent ideological background that gave birth in the late 1960s to the Maoist guerrilla organization Sendero Luminoso. Could racist indigenism or a meeting of a handful of utopian leftist militants have ever developed into the embryo of a bloodthirsty terrorist group that will hold the country hostage for several decades? According to these works, that is the way *senderismo* began in Peru.

As to the relation between dogmatic socialism and radical indigenism, it is widely believed that, following Mariátegui's notion that the Inca Empire or Tahuantinsuyu (or Tawantinsuyu) constituted a sort of primitive communist society, *senderistas* and their leader, the former philosophy professor at Ayacucho's Universidad Nacional de San Cristóbal de Huamanga, hoped to create a new Peru that would be a combination of pre-Columbian Inca society and the Maoist revolutionary regime. Vargas Llosa, however, rejects this idea that Sendero Luminoso was trying to preserve indigenous cultures and bring back the Inca Empire in all its glory: "In contrast with the image that some irredeemable enthusiasts of local color would like to fabricate, Sendero Luminoso was not an indigenist movement, of Quechua ethnic vindication, anti-Western, contemporary expression of the old Andean messianism" (*Utopía* 330). Instead, argues the author, what they really wanted was quite the opposite: erasing every trace of the cultural past as Mao Zedong tried to do with during the Cultural Revolution. The interconnection between indigenism and revolutionary thought proposed by Mariátegui is also discussed when a professor named Maros Mar describes socialism as the only solution for the dilemma of the integration of indigenous communities. Ultimately, even if going in different directions, Mayra and Mascarita share a common fanaticism guided by what the implicit author considers naïve fictions. Likewise, whereas in *Mayra* the narrator uses the widespread homophobia among leftist militants as a way of unveiling their hypocrisy, in *The Storyteller* it is gender discrimination and the killing of "imperfect" newborn babies that serves the same purpose.

While Jean O'Bryan-Knight and other critics have discussed the technical, structural, and thematic similarities that can be found among *Aunt Julia*, *Mayra*, and *The Storyteller* (all three novels share the presence of a protagonist who is also the narrator and a semi-autobiographical writer), the latter resembles *Death in the Andes* in a different aspect. It portrays the

existence of two parallel Perus that are oblivious to each other: on the one hand, the Andean (Quechua and Aymara) and Amazonian indigenous and on the other, the coastal indigenous that has become mestizo. Still within the anti-indigenist discourse underscored previously, in *Death in the Andes* we have a different response to indigenists such as Valcárcel, Manuel González Prada, and Mariátegui who conceived Indians as the true Peruvians: what if modern Latin American citizens went back to pre-Columbian ways? Vargas Llosa's answer is this novel in which two outsiders, a tavern keeper named Dionisio and his wife, Doña Adriana, convince the inhabitants of a fictional Andean town called Naccos to practice human sacrifice and cannibalism in order to placate evil mountain spirits. When three men, Pedrito Tinoco, Don Mellardo Llantac and Casimiro Huaracaya, suddenly disappear, two civil guards, Corporal Lituma (a recurring character in Vargas Llosa's fiction) and his adjutant, Tomás Carreño, are put in charge of the investigation. Although at first they suspect that the Sendero Luminoso guerrillas are responsible for the disappearances, Lituma eventually realizes, thanks to the remarks of a Danish archaeology professor named Paul Sirmsson who is doing fieldwork in Peru, that the resurgence of pre-Incan ritual human sacrifices may be the answer to the mystery.

In fact, the novel suggests in several passages that Sendero Luminoso's massacres are nothing but a continuation or modern version of pre-Columbian human sacrifice. For instance, a minor character, "the blond engineer," wonders "if what's going on in Peru isn't a resurrection of all that buried violence. As if it had been hidden somewhere, and suddenly, for some reason, it all surfaced again" (153). In the opening of the novel Lituma had already suggested that there were more than political objectives to Sendero Luminoso's assassinations: "Weren't the terrucos [Sendero Luminoso] killing people left and right and saying it was for the revolution? They got a kick out of blood, too" (19). Beyond the practice of human sacrifice, in the denouement of the novel we learn that the locals have also been practicing ritual cannibalism, to which they refer, in Catholic terms, as "communion." This unexpected development had been prefigured when one of the locals mentioned that Dionisio's Quechua last name meant "Eater of Raw Meat" (165). Later, it is also foreshadowed in a conversation about the Sendero Luminoso's so-called people's trials between Lituma and Dionisio:

"The lucky ones were whipped, the rest had their heads bashed in."

"All we need now is for them to suck people's blood and eat them raw,"

"I'll come to that?" The cantinero replied. (81)

And once again, the gruesome finding is linked to Stirrison's explanations about pre-Inca cannibalism:

As far as horrible things are concerned, he could give a few lessons to the terricos, mere novices who only knew how to kill people with bullets or knives, or by crushing their skulls, which was child's play compared to the techniques employed by the ancient Peruvians, who had achieved the heights of refinement. Even more than the ancient Mexicans, despite an international conspiracy of historians to conceal the Peruvian contribution to the art of human sacrifice . . . how many people had heard about the religious passion of the Chancas and Huancas for human viscera, about the delicate surgery in which they removed their victims' livers and brains and kidneys and are them in their ceremonies, washing it all down with good corn chicha? (146)

Three years after the publication of *Death in the Andes*, Vargas Llosa coincides with the arguments of his character, Stirrison, when he develops, in *La utopía arcáica*, his interpretation of the birth of Peruvian indigenous discourse. In this essay, he analyzes the writings of Valcárcel, in which the latter idyllically conceives of pre-Columbian Peru as a lost paradise that epitomized socialism's collectivist utopia. Among the Incas, maintains Valcárcel (coinciding with the character of Maros Mar in *Death in the Andes*), work was not oriented by a mercantile spirit but by an altruistic will to serve the community. By the same token, the benevolent government took care of its subjects' needs and respected the idiosyncrasies and the autonomy of the peoples incorporated to the Empire. In turn, Vargas Llosa denounces these texts as romanticized fictions inspired by European mythification: "This description of that lost paradise is not historical, even if the one who wrote it was a historian: it is ideological and mythical. To make it possible, it was necessary to perform a surgery that eliminated from that perfect society everything that could make it ugly or attack its perfection" (171). Then he mentions human sacrifice, a widespread practice in Peru during and before the Inca Empire, with a special emphasis on the *capacocha*, a ceremony in which a great number of children brought from all over the Tahuantinsuyo were immolated. Also coinciding with his character, Stirrison, Vargas Llosa explains that the reason the Huancas and Chancas helped the Spanish conquistadors was that they were subjugated nations in the Inca Empire. He also mentions the *mitimaz*, or massive deportations by which the Incas uprooted entire peoples from their homelands in order to control them more easily. Finally, the author points out that when Francisco Pizarro arrived in Peru, the Inca Empire was not the ahistorical Arcadia described by indigenists but a land torn by a bloody civil war due to the disputes with respect to

the dynastic succession. All these passages in his novels and essays are Vargas Llosa's moralistic (and arguably essentialist) response to those Peruvian academics who rhetorically longed for a return to pre-Columbian ways. However, he fails to point out, for example, that at the time the European Inquisition was burning hundreds of people alive at the stake.

This historical research had previously found its place in *Death in Los Andes*. Thus, according to his character Stirrison, in the ancient, central Andean cultures of the Huancas and the Chancas it was common to sacrifice humans when they were going to build a new road, divert a river, or build a temple or fortress. In this way, they showed respect for the *apus*, or spirits of the mountains whom they were otherwise going to disturb, and thus prevented avalanches, floods, and lightning from killing their people. The professor, however, does not present these facts as criticism of these cultures but as proof of their religious devotion. He also reminds his interlocutors that one has to think about these rituals and conquests from a historical perspective: "Of course they were animals. Can any ancient people pass the test? Which of them was not cruel and intolerant when judged from a contemporary perspective?" (153). In fact, perhaps going against the grain of contemporary Peruvian academic discourse, he sees the Huancas and the Chancas as the victims of Inca imperialism: "They had helped the Conquistadors in the belief that they, in turn, would help the Huancas gain their freedom from those who had enslaved them" (151).

Stirrison also contends that we should not make the mistake of trying to understand Sendero Luminoso's killings with our minds because they have "no rational explanation" (153). In fact, not only the terrorists' killings, which are supposedly motivated by political ideology, but also the religious rituals of human sacrifice and cannibalism are depicted in the novel as irrational behavior that the reader should not try to approach with a Western rationalistic mindset. The very name of one of the two persons responsible for convincing locals about the benefits of human sacrifice, Dionisio, suggests precisely the Dionysian nature of this underworld: he is proud of having taught local men to enjoy life. Like Dionysus, he represents the instinctual and irrational side of human nature. Without this Peruvian Dionysus, local men agree, there would be no festivities. In his cantina, he organizes orgiastic parties in which, instead of wine like Dionysus and Bacchus, he uses pisco to make his customers uninhibited and to manipulate them into a frenzy. It would be worth mentioning here that the indirect references to Greek mythology (Dionysus, the labyrinth of Theseus, etc.) could be one more proof of the author's Eurocentric mentality.

On the other side of the temperamental spectrum, we have Lirima's critical rationalism that mocks what he considers ignorant and

anachronistic superstitions: "You're all very gullible, very naïve," replied Lituma. "You believe anything, like stories about pishacos and mukis. In civilized places, nobody believes things like that anymore" (86). Toward the end of the novel, however, he gives in to the imposing landscape of the Andes and begins to accept and unconsciously internalize the intuitive values of the locals. Thus, after miraculously surviving a *huayco* (an Andean avalanche of snow, mud, and rocks), Lituma surrenders to their worldview, while using a seriocomic tone that hints at his cultural transformation, "as if he had passed a test, he thought, as if these damn mountains, this damn sierra, had finally accepted him. Before starting out, he pressed his mouth against the rock that had sheltered him, and whispered, like a serrucho: 'Thank you for saving my life, mamiy, apu, pachamama, or whoever the fuck you are'" (180). It seems, therefore, that the organic Greek religion that celebrated the power and fertility of nature and its counterpart in the Peruvian Andes have found a new follower. How is it possible that westernized laborers with at least a grade school education and who live in the modern world have ended up believing in human sacrifice? And how is it possible that Lituma himself is reluctantly accepting a worldview that he had been criticizing so harshly? Again, we find an explanation in the irrational instincts that all human beings possess, whether or not censored by a social or parental superego. Congruent with Vargas Llosa's interest in irrationality, in *Death in the Andes* the spokesmen of Sendero Luminoso justify their killings with absurd conspiracy theories about secret strategies devised by imperialist and capitalist states. Beyond this, their revolutionary trials in which they force locals to kill "antisocial types" with their own hands or with stones and sticks and then prevent them from burying the bodies are depicted in the context of a pre-Columbian irrational, magico-religious mentality.

In contrast with Stirrison, Lituma is much less tolerant of contemporary Andean mentality. As in other novels of Vargas Llosa where he appears, we are told that Lituma is a mesitizo who grew up in the coastal town of Piura, in northern Peru, and does not feel at home in the Andes; in fact, in *Death in the Andes* he repeatedly expresses his dislike of Andean people. From the opening paragraph, he expresses his rejection of the indigenous worldview and behavior and even of the Quechua language, which makes him feel uneasy because it resembles "savage music" (3). Even though his adjutant and close friend, Carreño, is also Andean and speaks Quechua, Lituma rejects a world that seems impenetrable to him. He feels particularly frustrated by what he perceives as Indian indolence and by his inability to engage the locals in productive communication. This invisible barrier created by cultural differences had previously been

pointed out by the French tourists killed by Sendero Luminoso operatives in the first chapters: "He had made several attempts, in his poor Spanish, to engage his neighbors in conversation, with absolutely no success. 'It isn't race that separates us, it's an entire culture,' *la petite Michèle* reminded him" (11). In the denouement of the novel, once Lituma realizes that the human sacrifices respond to the ancient tradition of appeasing the *apus* before disturbing the land, he vents his rage against the locals: "You motherfuckers!" he bellowed then at the top of his lungs. 'Fucking serruchos! [mountain people] Goddamn Indians, you superstitious pagan sons of bitches!" (174).

In *Death in the Andes*, therefore, Vargas Llosa tries to prove that, no matter how well-intentioned and inspirational indigenism may be for indigenous peoples that have been oppressed, neglected and marginalized for centuries, one should not romanticize pre-Columbian history or create false fantasies about a world that, from today's ethical perspective, was far from peaceful and idyllic. By creating contemporary fictional characters who adopt Amazonian (in *The Storyteller*) and pre-Inca (in *Death in the Andes*) cultural ways, he also warns about the dangers of a neoindigenist philosophy that, in his view, shows its ugliest face in the massacres committed by the Maoist guerrillas of Sendero Luminoso. Evidently, in Vargas Llosa's literary discourse human sacrifice and cannibalism represent the archaic and irrational ways of pre-Columbian civilizations. Indeed, as Elizabeth P. Benson's book *Ritual Sacrifice in Ancient Peru* (2001) contends, ancient Peruvians (especially the Inca and the Moche) practiced human sacrifice to maintain a proper reciprocal relationship with the supernatural world. To focus exclusively on these rituals in order to discredit their culture, however, seems somewhat simplistic and reductionist, particularly if we consider that these were two of the most recurring arguments (along with paganism and homosexuality) used by the conquistadors to justify the conquest of the Americas and the subjugation of its people. Therefore, perhaps making the same mistake of which he accuses the indigenist movement, Vargas Llosa ends up creating an alternative "fantasy" or "fiction" of the pre-Columbian world.

In *Death in the Andes*, these primitive beliefs have weathered the Spanish Christianization of Peru. Yet could we affirm that the actions of Dionisio and his wife Adriana also respond to irrational instincts? The fact is that the couple shows no guilt or remorse for the assassinations they have instigated. This proves that, rather than acting like inebriated, irrational beings as do some of the locals in Naccos, they sincerely approach the ritual sacrifices from a religious (rather than cruel or evil) perspective. Whereas Sendero

Luminoso's massacres respond to a fanatical, ideological take on Peruvian reality, Dionisio and Adriana go beyond this more common violence by actually eating their victims, not as a result of an irrational reaction but for premediated, religious reasons.

At any rate, in Vargas Llosa's worldview both types of violence are intimately related not only by the leitmotif of the irrational side of human nature (beyond political ideology and religion) but also by the characters' fanatical, utopian, and indigenist desire to return (either rhetorically or in praxis) to pre-Columbian ways.³ In his view, they also respond to humans' need to create fictions. In this sense, Kristal maintains that while Vargas Llosa has demonstrated his concern for the suffering of the Andean population, in *Death in the Andes* "he is also weary of the violent tendencies of the local populations. In Vargas Llosa's analysis all of the parties involved [Sendero Luminoso, the government, and Peruvian peasants] are prone to violence and all have committed crimes. A feeling of mistrust of the military; the guerrilla movement, and the indigenous population also pervades *Death in the Andes*" (188). The character of the mure Pedro Tinoco, who is first attacked by Sendero Luminoso, then tortured by Lituma's superior and then singled out by locals for their ritual human sacrifice, symbolizes the way in which Andean villages were exposed to all types of blind fanaticism and were also caught in the middle of a bloody war between terrorists and governmental forces.

Perhaps anticipating criticism about the verisimilitude of these plots, in *Death in the Andes* Vargas Llosa contextualizes the human sacrifices and cannibalism in Naccos with the fact that, as his character Lituma explains, in Ayacucho people are scared about a *pishitaco* invasion and in Lima there is widespread paranoia about foreign eye thieves. Later, referring to human sacrifice, Lituma insists, "Around here they kill anybody for anything. They're always finding graves, like that one outside Huanta with the ten Protestant missionaries. Why shouldn't there be human sacrifices too?" (173). In the end, however, the Corporal never arrests the murderers because he is convinced that the facts are too outlandish to be taken seriously by his superiors in Lima. By the same token, in *The Storyteller* the strange adventures of Mascacita in the Amazonian jungle are revealed as a fantasy of the novelist-narrator who, in his imagination, is trying to make sense of the mysterious disappearance of his friend. The narrator's fictional reconstruction of the Amazonian indigenous world is even more questionable if we consider that rather than conducting research on site (or interviewing the protagonist and the people who knew him, as the narrator does in *Medita*), he writes about his friend's Indian adventures from faraway Florence, Italy.

As regards the novelistic portrayal of indigenism as just another Latin American fiction, Kristal maintains that "Vargas Llosa has not resolved his own dilemmas about the preservation or eventual modernization of indigenous cultures" (*Temperament of the Word* 157). Indeed, in direct contrast with his interviews, lectures and essays, in his novels Vargas Llosa wrestles with arguments for and against the assimilation of Andean and Amazonian Peruvians into the Westernized national life and explores, through the different opinions of his characters, the best possible options. In the end, however, he brings closure to all this speculation, despite admitting that there are both advantages and disadvantages to this process, when he labels the indigenist movements in Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia as "collectivism," a term he has associated with the socialism, Nazism, and fascism of the past, as well as with today's nationalism and religious (Christian and Islamic) integritism. As one can notice in the following passage from *Making Waves* (1997), as well as in the public declarations previously quoted, Vargas Llosa leaves little doubt as to where he stands on this issue: "Perhaps there is no realistic way of integrating our societies other than by asking the Indians to pay this high price. Perhaps the ideal, that is, the preservation of America's primitive peoples, is a utopia incompatible with a more urgent goal: the establishment of modern societies where social and economic differences are reduced to reasonable proportions and all can attain, at the very least, a free and decent life" (377).

All things considered, is there truly a divide between Vargas Llosa's fiction and his public persona, as his Hispanic critics seem to suggest? Or can we rather see him as a "unified being," as the author requested in the reception speech for the Irving Kristol Award? While it is obvious that his fiction changed dramatically from an ideological standpoint after he affiliated himself to liberalism (in the European sense) or neoliberalism, the truth is that it never ceased to reflect the author's ethical and moral commitments: he is still a politically engaged writer, albeit of a different sign. However, as expected from the novelistic genre, in his fiction he uses a dialogical, polyphonic, and heteroglossic approaches that, in his lectures and essays, could seem otherwise unnecessary. In the case of indigenism, Vargas Llosa acknowledges a positive side in its revalorization of indigenous cultures but condemns the extremism that, when used as an instrument of power, can lead it closer to antidemocratic intolerance and racism. In his ultimate view, indigenism is merely a producer of ahistorical idealizations and mystifications.

NOTES

1. This quotation comes from Gene H. Bell-Villada's essay "Sex, Politics, and High Art: Vargas Llosa's Long Road to *The Fear of the Goat*" included in this volume (137–158).
2. Actually, the novel presents the inventions of a fictional novelist-narrator who is trying to imagine Mascarita's imitation of a Machiguenga storyteller.
3. As several critics have pointed out, this novel was influenced by the author's participation in a 1983 committee that investigated the ritual massacre of eight journalists in the Andean village of Uchuraccay, near Ayacucho.

CHAPTER 7

THE RECOVERED CHILDHOOD UTOPIAN LIBERALISM AND MERCANTILISM OF THE SKIN IN A FISH IN THE WATER

SERGIO R. FRANCO

BECAUSE OF ITS BUILT-IN HETEROGENEITY AND MULTIPLICITY OF intentions and its proximity to the time of its writing, Mario Vargas Llosa's *A Fish in the Water* (1993) occupies a unique position in the growing corpus of Latin American autobiographical writing. In effect, only three years before its publication, Vargas Llosa had been a candidate for the Peruvian presidency. He was the candidate for Frente Democrático, or Democratic Front (FREDEMO), a coalition that included traditional parties, like Acción Popular and Partido Popular Cristiano, and the new Movimiento Libertad, led by the writer. Vargas Llosa was defeated by Alberto Fujimori, a then-unknown Peruvian engineer of Japanese descent, after two electoral rounds (April and June, 1990). This defeat not only ended an intense political campaign but also constituted a major surprise for those involved. The unexpected turn of events of the last two weeks of those presidential elections two decades ago was also a surprise to average citizens like myself. Without a doubt, those are the events that explain the immediate reception of *A Fish in the Water* as a chronicle of the political campaign. This is an impoverishing interpretation of a text that exceeds such a characterization. However, it is also true without this defeat the memoirs would not exist.¹ It is the magnitude of the endeavor that undeniably marks a key moment in the life of the protagonist. There is no other way of understanding his attempt at looking at his life from that viewpoint in order to explain the reasons for his defeat, offer eyewitness testimony, and undeniably, politicize with his antagonists.