

THE PHENOMENON OF DICTATORSHIP AND POWER IN THE NOVELS OF
MARIO VARGAS LLOSA

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Abstract. This article examines the recurring motifs of dictatorship, authority, and the abuse of power as they manifest across the major fictional works of Peruvian Nobel laureate Mario Vargas Llosa (1936-2025). Drawing on close readings of *The Feast of the Goat* (2000), *Conversation in the Cathedral* (1969), *The War of the End of the World* (1981), and *The Real Life of Alejandro Mayta* (1984), among others, the study argues that Vargas Llosa constructs an enduring literary anatomy of authoritarianism rooted in the Latin American political experience. The article traces how power in his novels functions not merely as a political instrument but as a corrupting force that permeates the private, psychological, and moral dimensions of individual life. Particular attention is given to Vargas Llosa's narrative techniques-fragmented chronology, multiple perspectives, and intertextual dialogue-as means of exposing the systemic nature of tyranny. The article concludes that Vargas Llosa's oeuvre constitutes a sustained and philosophically coherent critique of totalitarianism, one that transcends its immediate historical contexts to illuminate universal questions about freedom, complicity, and human dignity.

Keywords: Mario Vargas Llosa, dictatorship, power, Latin American literature, authoritarianism, totalitarianism, political novel, Trujillo, narrative technique.

INTRODUCTION. Mario Vargas Llosa is perhaps the most politically engaged novelist of the twentieth-century Latin American literary tradition. Unlike the pure formalists or magical realists with whom he is often grouped, Vargas Llosa consistently returned, across a career spanning six decades, to a single obsessive question: how does power corrupt, sustain itself, and destroy both those who wield it and those who are subjected to it? His Nobel Prize acceptance speech in 2010 framed literature itself as 'a form of permanent insurrection'-a declaration that illuminates the moral urgency underlying even his most formally experimental work.

The theme of dictatorship in Vargas Llosa's fiction is not simply a matter of political backdrop. It is, rather, the structuring principle around which characters, plots, and moral dilemmas are organized. Whether depicting the paranoid court of Rafael Leónidas Trujillo in the Dominican Republic, the slow decomposition of Peruvian society under the military oligarchy, or the messianic violence of religious fanaticism in the Brazilian sertão, Vargas Llosa treats power as an all-encompassing system-one that deforms personal relationships, corrupts language, and extinguishes individual freedom. This article seeks to map the contours of that system across his major works, and to assess what it means for our understanding of authoritarianism as a literary and political phenomenon.

The critical literature on Vargas Llosa has, of course, grappled with these themes extensively. Scholars such as Sara Castro-Klarén, Efraín Kristal, and Raymond Williams have traced the ideological evolution of his political thought from the Marxist sympathies of his youth



to the classical liberalism of his maturity. Yet the literary dimension of his engagement with power-the specific narrative strategies, symbolic economies, and moral frameworks through which he renders tyranny intelligible-remains a rich field of inquiry.

METHODS. Published in 2000, *The Feast of the Goat* stands as Vargas Llosa's most direct and sustained engagement with the phenomenon of dictatorship. The novel reconstructs the final hours of Trujillo's regime in the Dominican Republic, weaving together three narrative strands: the return of Urania Cabral to Santo Domingo decades after her father's betrayal; the daily routines and mounting anxieties of Trujillo himself on the day of his assassination; and the perspectives of the conspirators who plan and execute his murder.

What distinguishes Vargas Llosa's portrait of Trujillo from mere historical chronicle is its insistence on the intimate mechanics of absolute power. The novel opens not with political events but with the Generalísimo's morning rituals-his obsessive control over his own aging body, his rage at biological decay. This opening gambit is enormously significant: it establishes the continuity between the macro-politics of dictatorship and the micro-politics of personal domination. For Trujillo, power is indissociable from the performance of virility, and the novel's most disturbing scenes-including the rape of the adolescent Urania at the dictator's behest-demonstrate how the political and the sexual are fused in the economy of authoritarian desire.

Vargas Llosa's formal choices reinforce this thematic argument. The fragmented, non-linear chronology of the novel-a technique he employed as early as *Conversation in the Cathedral*-prevents the reader from finding stable ground outside the system of power. Every perspective is compromised, every act of seeming resistance is shadowed by complicity. Even the assassins, depicted with considerable sympathy, are implicated in the regime they seek to destroy: most were at some point beneficiaries or active agents of Trujillo's terror. The novel thus refuses the consolation of a clean moral outside-of a perspective untouched by power's reach. If *The Feast of the Goat* is Vargas Llosa's most focused study of dictatorship, *Conversation in the Cathedral* (1969) is his most formally ambitious. Set during the dictatorship of Manuel Odría in Peru (1948-1956), the novel unfolds almost entirely in dialogue-a four-hour conversation between Santiago Zavala, a disillusioned journalist of middle-class origins, and Ambrosio, his father's former chauffeur, now a dog-pound worker. Through their exchange, the novel reconstructs the social and political atmosphere of Odría's Peru, moving outward from personal history to reveal the systemic corruption of an entire society.

The famous opening question-'At what precise moment had Peru fucked itself up?'-announces the novel's central preoccupation: the search for the origin of political and moral corruption. But Vargas Llosa's formal technique subverts any simple answer. The novel's multiple narrative layers-nested conversations, interior monologues, cross-cutting timelines-resist the identification of a single cause or a single guilty party. Peru, the novel suggests, did not 'fuck itself up' at any one moment; it was constituted by an ongoing, distributed process of compromise, silence, and self-interest in which virtually everyone participated.

This distributed quality of power is one of the most philosophically sophisticated aspects of Vargas Llosa's political vision. He is far more Foucauldian than Manichean: power in his novels is not simply the property of tyrants but a field of relations in which all social actors are implicated. The timid bureaucrat who accepts a bribe, the journalist who suppresses a story, the father who sacrifices his child's dignity to protect his business interests-all are agents of the system, not merely its victims. This refusal of simple victimhood is both the strength and the provocation of his political fiction. *The War of the End of the World* (1981), Vargas Llosa's most



epic novel, transposes the theme of power from the political to the religious and ideological register. Based on the historical Canudos War in northeastern Brazil (1896-1897), the novel depicts the conflict between the millenarian community of Canudos-gathered around the charismatic figure of Antônio Conselheiro-and the forces of the newly established Brazilian Republic. The result is a meditation on what we might call power's ideological supplement: the role of belief, prophecy, and collective frenzy in sustaining structures of domination and resistance.

Conselheiro is one of Vargas Llosa's most complex figures of authority. He is neither simply a cynical manipulator nor a purely sincere prophet. His power derives from a genuine asceticism and a real capacity for empathy with the dispossessed; yet it is also a form of tyranny, one that demands absolute submission and channels the legitimate grievances of the poor into an apocalyptic framework that ultimately destroys them. The Republic's forces, meanwhile, are shown to exercise their own brutal form of power-rational, bureaucratic, and no less destructive for being secular.

The novel's moral is not that one form of power is preferable to another, but that the will to power itself-whether sanctified by God or by Progress-tends toward annihilation. This pessimistic insight connects *The War of the End of the World* to the broader tradition of what Tzvetan Todorov called 'the literature of extreme situations': fiction that tests human values under conditions of extremity and finds them, more often than not, wanting. A distinctive feature of Vargas Llosa's treatment of power is his interest in its aftermath-in the ways that dictatorial regimes continue to shape consciousness, memory, and social relations long after their formal end. This concern is most explicit in *The Feast of the Goat*, where the adult Urania's return to Santo Domingo is structured as a confrontation with a past that has never fully receded. Her inability to speak of her violation for decades, and the novel's revelation of it in stages, formally enacts the traumatic temporality of post-dictatorial memory: the way certain truths resist integration into narrative, insisting on returning as fragments, gaps, and silences.

Similar dynamics appear in *The Real Life of Alejandro Mayta* (1984), which meditates on the relationship between political idealism and its betrayal. The novel's unnamed narrator-clearly a figure for Vargas Llosa himself-investigates the history of a failed leftist uprising, interviewing survivors and reconstructing the ideological enthusiasms of the 1950s. What emerges is a portrait of how political commitment can function as a form of self-deception: a refusal to see the authoritarian potential within revolutionary programs. The novel is thus a self-critical work, examining the intellectual complicities that allow tyranny to be justified in the name of liberation.

This self-critical dimension connects to the broader evolution of Vargas Llosa's political thought. His early admiration for the Cuban Revolution gave way, over the 1970s and 1980s, to an increasingly firm liberal anti-totalitarianism. His essay collection *Making Waves* and his 1990 Peruvian presidential campaign (unsuccessful) were expressions of a political philosophy centered on individual liberty, the rule of law, and the separation of powers. Yet his fiction, at its best, is more nuanced than his political essays: it registers the seductions of authoritarian power as well as its horrors, and acknowledges the extent to which liberal subjects are themselves implicated in structures they claim to oppose.

DISCUSSION. Any account of power in Vargas Llosa must attend to the specifically literary means by which he constructs his critiques. His signature technique-the 'Chinese box' or 'communicating vessels' structure, described in his theoretical essay *A Young Man's Guide to the Novel*-creates narratives in which different temporal layers, perspectives, and registers are



embedded within one another, generating constant irony and contradiction. This formal restlessness is itself a political statement: it refuses the monological authority of the omniscient narrator, insisting instead on perspectivism and incompleteness.

The use of multiple focalizers-characters whose partial, interested perspectives are set against one another without any external arbiter of truth-is particularly significant in the context of dictatorship. For dictatorial regimes depend precisely on the suppression of competing voices and the installation of a single, authoritative narrative. Vargas Llosa's formal polyphony is thus a kind of anti-dictatorial aesthetics: a formal enactment of the pluralism he advocates politically.

His prose style, too, deserves notice. Vargas Llosa is a master of what might be called the slow revelation: the technique of withholding crucial information until the moment of maximum impact, so that the reader's understanding of characters and events is radically revised. This technique is deployed most powerfully in *The Feast of the Goat*, where the nature of Urania's trauma is revealed only in the novel's penultimate section. The effect is to implicate the reader in the structure of complicity and concealment that sustains dictatorship: we have been reading, and reading sympathetically, without fully knowing what we are reading. Vargas Llosa's engagement with dictatorship must be situated within the broader tradition of the Latin American 'novela de dictador' (novel of the dictator), which includes Miguel Ángel Asturias's *El señor Presidente* (1946), Alejo Carpentier's *Reasons of State* (1974), and Gabriel García Márquez's *The Autumn of the Patriarch* (1975). Vargas Llosa both belongs to and departs from this tradition in significant ways.

Like Asturias and García Márquez, he uses the figure of the dictator as a lens through which to examine the larger pathologies of Latin American political culture: the cult of machismo, the complicity of the Church, the fragility of liberal institutions, the legacies of colonialism. But where Asturias employs surrealism and García Márquez magical realism as modes of representing the distortions of dictatorial consciousness, Vargas Llosa is committed to a rigorous, demythologizing realism. His Trujillo is not a fantastic figure but a frighteningly intelligible one: a man whose extraordinary brutality is rooted in recognizably ordinary appetites-for control, for admiration, for sexual dominance.

This realist commitment reflects Vargas Llosa's deep engagement with the French literary tradition-with Flaubert, Balzac, and Sartre-as much as with Latin American precursors. His dictatorship novels are, at their core, social novels in the nineteenth-century sense: exhaustive analyses of the relationship between individual psychology and social structure. What distinguishes them from their nineteenth-century models is their formal sophistication and their subject matter: the specifically modern pathologies of totalitarian power.

CONCLUSIONS. Mario Vargas Llosa died in April 2025, leaving behind one of the richest and most politically engaged bodies of fiction in the literature of any language. His novels of dictatorship and power are not simply historical documents or political tracts: they are works of art that dramatize, with extraordinary formal intelligence and moral seriousness, the perennial human struggle between freedom and subjugation, between the dignity of the individual and the crushing weight of authoritarian systems.

What makes these novels enduringly valuable is precisely their refusal of simple consolations. Vargas Llosa does not offer us heroes untouched by complicity or villains whose evil is simply inexplicable. He shows us, instead, how tyranny is made-from the small surrenders of ordinary people, from the seductions of power, from the failure of moral imagination that



allows human beings to accommodate themselves to the intolerable. In doing so, he asks us to examine our own potential for accommodation-and to understand freedom not as a natural condition but as an achievement that demands perpetual vigilance.

The phenomenon of dictatorship in Vargas Llosa's novels is, ultimately, a phenomenon of the human spirit: of its capacity for domination and its capacity for resistance. In mapping the anatomy of that spirit across a career of remarkable breadth and depth, Vargas Llosa has made a contribution to world literature that will endure long after the specific regimes he depicted have passed from living memory.

It is worth underscoring, in this concluding reflection, the degree to which Vargas Llosa's engagement with dictatorship was never merely academic or aesthetic. He lived through the political turbulences of twentieth-century Latin America at close range: he witnessed the euphoria and subsequent disillusionment of the Cuban Revolution; he ran for the presidency of Peru in 1990 against the authoritarian populism of Alberto Fujimori; and he publicly condemned the regimes of Fidel Castro, Hugo Chávez, and Nicolás Maduro, often at considerable personal and professional cost within intellectual circles where such positions were unfashionable. His fiction must therefore be read as the deepest expression of a political intelligence that refused comfortable illusions-whether of the revolutionary left or the authoritarian right-and that insisted, with stubborn consistency, on the primacy of individual liberty over collective ideological projects.

One of the most remarkable aspects of Vargas Llosa's achievement is his capacity to hold psychological depth and political breadth in sustained tension. His dictators and victims alike are rendered with a fullness that resists schematic reading: Trujillo in *The Feast of the Goat* is monstrous, yet the novel grants him an interiority that makes his monstrosity legible rather than simply repellent; Urania Cabral's suffering is charted with a clinical precision that paradoxically makes it more, not less, affecting. This double movement-simultaneously humanizing and damning-is the signature of Vargas Llosa's moral imagination, and it is what separates his political novels from mere propaganda or documentary fiction. He understood, as the great realists always have, that moral seriousness requires engagement with particularity: with the specific texture of a life distorted by power, not merely with the abstract structures of oppression.

Vargas Llosa's later novels, including *The Dream of the Celt* (2010) and *The Discreet Hero* (2013), suggest a broadening rather than a narrowing of his political concerns. *The Dream of the Celt* fictionalizes the life of Irish revolutionary Roger Casement and his documentation of atrocities in the Congo and the Peruvian Amazon, extending the anatomy of power into the domain of colonial exploitation. In this work, dictatorship sheds its distinctively Latin American coloration to become a global phenomenon-a reminder that the structures of domination Vargas Llosa spent his career examining were not regional pathologies but expressions of universal human tendencies toward the consolidation and abuse of power. Seen across this wider arc, his oeuvre constitutes nothing less than a literary history of the will to domination, reaching from the rubber plantations of the Amazon to the torture chambers of Caribbean despotism.

The relevance of Vargas Llosa's political fiction to the present moment can hardly be overstated. At a time when authoritarian governments are consolidating power across multiple continents, when democratic norms are under sustained pressure from populist demagogues and technocratic oligarchs alike, his novels offer something that political theory alone cannot provide: the felt experience of what it means to live under a regime that controls not merely the public



sphere but the intimate recesses of personal life. His fiction trains the moral imagination to recognize tyranny in its early stages-in the erosion of language, in the cultivation of fear, in the normalization of small cruelties-before it has consolidated itself into a system impervious to resistance. In this sense, reading Vargas Llosa is not merely a literary exercise but a civic one: an education in the conditions of freedom and the costs of its loss.

It is equally important to recognize the ethical courage that Vargas Llosa's critical realism demanded of him as a writer. Unlike those authors who use the historical distance of dictatorship to settle into comfortable moral superiority, Vargas Llosa consistently turned his analytical lens on himself and on the liberal intellectual tradition he inhabited. Works like *The Real Life of Alejandro Mayta* and *The War of the End of the World* are profoundly self-questioning texts, alert to the ways in which progressive idealism can shade into fanaticism, and in which the desire for justice can become an alibi for violence. This willingness to subject his own sympathies to critical scrutiny is one of the qualities that elevates his fiction above political allegory and into the domain of genuine literary art.

Finally, it is worth noting the exemplary quality of Vargas Llosa's career as an intellectual model. He combined, across more than six decades, the roles of novelist, essayist, journalist, playwright, memoirist, and public intellectual without allowing any one vocation to crowd out the others. His Nobel Prize lecture articulated, with characteristic eloquence, a vision of literature as the indispensable companion of freedom-as the space in which human beings, precisely because they inhabit fictional lives as well as their own, develop the capacity for empathy, self-examination, and critical resistance to the seductions of power. It is a vision that his own work, at its finest, magnificently embodies. The world that Vargas Llosa has left behind continues to need the kind of moral and imaginative courage his novels demonstrate: a courage rooted not in optimism, but in the clear-eyed refusal to look away from what power does to human beings, and in the abiding conviction that naming that truth, however painful, is itself an act of freedom.

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