

“The cursed temptation of writing’: Postmodern Aspects of Vargas Llosa’s *The Storyteller*.” Paper presented at **Humanities Presentations**, Honors Day, at Birmingham-Southern College, Birmingham, AL. May 2008.

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Postmodern Aspects of Vargas Llosa’s *The Storyteller***

Good afternoon. My name is Paul Blom, and the title of my presentation is “The cursed temptation of writing’: Postmodern Aspects of Vargas Llosa’s *The Storyteller*.”

Postmodern theory is suspicious of anything that is generally considered natural, universal, or inherent. For this reason, it challenges the supposed divine right to rule or the natural superiority of one group over another. Instead, it recognizes in one group’s domination a systematic marginalization and silencing of the minority, the Other. Postmodern theory then tends toward an emphasis to give voice to the unheard voices. The literary canon’s new interest in and recognition of international fiction is primarily a result of the postmodern movement, which spawned the postcolonial movement, a fact of which international fiction writers are aware. For this reason, the majority of such writers cannot help but be heavily influenced by the postmodern movement, both because of its global influence today and because the movement itself led to the larger recognition of their work. Furthermore, postmodern theory emphasizes notions of *pastiche*, the combination of or dialogue between various cultures of different locations, both geographic and temporal. It is easy to see, then, that postmodern theory is a significant lens through which to interpret the study of contemporary international fiction and any such work which falls into this category. One such work that reveals aspects of postmodern

influence is Mario Vargas Llosa's 1989 novel, *The Storyteller*. The novel intertwines two voices, the first being a modern Peruvian narrator. The second voice is a storyteller from the Machiguenga, an indigenous Peruvian tribe, and this storyteller might actually be the modern narrator's old friend, Saúl Zuratas. The work contains aspects of metafiction as well as the lack of any stable central authority or any stable identity, making this novel a significant postmodern contribution to the literary canon.

One of the most obvious ways in which Llosa's novel is a postmodern work is the fact that the novel itself is a work of metafiction, which Glen Ward aptly defines as "fiction about fiction" (31). Usually, any work of fiction attempts to suck the reader into the illusion that what he or she is reading is reality, forcing the reader into a "suspension of disbelief." In contrast, metafiction attempts to remind the reader that the work is, in fact, a work of fiction, a construction. In essence, metafiction recognizes the automatic desire of the reader to accept fiction for truth. In reminding the reader of its fictional nature, it challenges everything else that humans automatically accept as truth, thus destabilizing one's accepted notions of reality (Ward 30-32).

Throughout *The Storyteller*, the anonymous narrator constantly refers to his own process of writing the very novel that the reader is currently reading. Hayden White, in his discussion of the fictional nature of history, states that there is no such thing as non-fiction and includes history among the category of fiction. Any attempt to recount past events is an attempt at writing history, but such attempts are weakened by temporal and geographic distance as well as the subjectivity of language itself, the only medium through which historians can work. White's article focuses on the subjectivity of history, revealing the retrospective nature of history and the systems through which historical information is filtered, explaining how these completely alter

one's view of *what once was* so that a completely objective view of history is actually impossible. History is a *narrative*, something that can only be communicated through representations. Because there is an infinite number of things that can be communicated about any particular object, language can never fully encompass the entirety of any object. Thus, just as in writing a story, historians must select and omit various details, forming their own flawed account of "true" events.

The narrator of *The Storyteller* emphasizes the distance between the events he is supposedly recounting and the moment of composition of this account. Remembering his conversations with Saúl, the narrator says, "Today, here in Firenze, as I remember and jot down notes..." (33). The very use of the word "remember" once again points to the flaws of memory, something the narrator even admits two pages later as he hesitates upon recounting a conversation, saying, "But there I don't quite trust my memory" (35). Furthermore, the narrator is not merely making general references to his act of writing. He is forcing the reader to picture him in Firenze, the Italian name for Florence, locating himself within a particular geographic and temporal context, a context that places the narrator at a specific distance from the events he is supposedly narrating. A mention of such a distance cannot help but create a sense of doubt for the reader.

The references to himself and his writing constantly reappear throughout the chapters he narrates, although I don't have time to discuss them in detail today. Any passage in which the narrator refers back to himself or pulls the reader out of the narrative present and into the authorial present is a self-conscious attempt to force the reader to doubt the stability of this narrative and thus, acting as a microcosm for reality, to doubt the stability of reality itself.

However, the narrator does more than hint at a possible lack of authenticity for his narrative. He eventually explicitly doubts his own words. A bit less than halfway through the novel, the narrator describes his writing process as “devoting my days in Firenze...to weaving together the memories and fantasies of this story” (90). Along with another specific mention to himself and the location of composition, the narrator uses the word “weaving,” which connotes a construction, a combination of different facts into a coherent whole. Furthermore, the strands with which he weaves are admittedly not exclusively memories but also fantasies. Here he outright admits the possibility that many of these events may be inventions, false memories, or at the very least, mixed-up and slightly altered memories.

Such altered memories exist inevitably. Because of the distance between the events and the report of those events, the narrator cannot remember every single detail and is thus forced to fill in the blanks. At one point, the narrator laments the fallibility of human memory: “Memory is a snare, pure and simple: it alters, it subtly rearranges the past to fit the present. I have tried so many times to reconstruct that conversation...that by now I’m no longer sure of anything” (95). In similar fashion, Hayden White laments the impossibility of truly knowing anything of past events: “We cannot go and look at them in order to see if the historian has adequately reproduced them in his narrative” (88). The narrator constantly pulls the reader back out of the text, raising postmodern concerns toward any notion of a non-fictional history.

According to Ferdinand de Saussure’s theory of semiology, one of the fundamental works for the postmodern movement, an individual word or text has no inherent meaning but only the meaning that is ascribed to it. The relationship between the word and the real world object it represents is arbitrary, and the word—and even the ideas evoked by that word—can never fully encapsulate the truth of the real world object or referent. For this reason, any attempt

to communicate is limited, arbitrarily choosing various words to represent objects and always failing to communicate the totality of any object or concept (7-11).

Furthermore, all of these ideas are filtered through the language games of which everyone is a part. Saussure explains that, “without language, thought is a vague, uncharted nebula. There are no pre-existing ideas, and nothing is distinct before the appearance of language” (5). Because humans must think through language, whether it is verbal or pictorial, thought itself is limited, meaning humans can never fully comprehend the totality of anything just as they can never fully communicate the totality of anything.

Expounding upon Saussure’s work, Lyotard states that language systems can only be legitimized within the actual language system of which it speaks (214). Truth can only be communicated through language games in which nothing is universal, inherent, or set in stone, so “absolute truth” becomes a contradiction in terms. Instead of struggling for absolute truth, humanity must search for all possible truths for each object and should embrace all of them.

Because of the limitations of language, the narrator is forced to ponder the limitations of his own narrative and must even wonder at how well he has known anyone or anything. After describing one of his many coffeehouse conversations with Saúl, he refers to the future Saúl as “the one of future years whom I did not know, whom I must invent, since I have given in to the cursed temptation of writing about him” (35). Here, the narrator admits that his character is an invention. More significantly, any and all characters are inventions, even if they are based upon actual people. Because there is an infinite amount of information that could potentially be communicated concerning any single subject, to write about anything is to reduce it. Since one’s representation can never encompass the entire truth of that subject, from a black-and-white perspective, any such representation is a lie.

The Machiguengas themselves exhibit a lack of certainty to match that of the narrator. In fact, the very language of the Machiguenga seems to reveal a fundamental uncertainty in their culture. At one point in his story, the storyteller says, “I felt great sadness perhaps” (55). The use of the word “perhaps” is intriguing for most readers, since the declaration of an emotion is rarely qualified with a word that suggests doubt. However, all of the Machiguenga in the novel often close their declarative sentences with such words that reduce the declarative nature of such statements. While speaking of a long journey alone, the storyteller explains that he was lost and wounded but was saved by wandering strangers. When he wakes from his pain, he says, “Maybe I dreamed it all. I don’t know” (55). This is all too reminiscent of the modern narrator’s own doubts concerning the authenticity of his narrative: “Perhaps this is pure invention on my part after the event” (99).

While both the modern narrator and the Machiguenga storytellers seem reluctant to completely validate their own tales, the Machiguenga people as a whole reveal some inherent reluctance to make any kind of absolute statement. For these people, whose sun may crash to the earth at any moment, there is no stability. They have no fixed home, and thus they have no fixed truth either. Even the myths that are celebrated within the chapters narrated by the storyteller are varied. Not only are they filled with the repetition of uncertain qualifiers such as “perhaps,” but the storyteller admits that the myths and legends of his people have variations. When the storyteller presents a myth concerning the origin of the moon, he admits that his story is only one version, concluding his story with, “But the seripigari of Segakiato tell the story differently” (115). Postmodern theory, in response to the modernist theory of the search for an absolute truth, celebrates the fact that no such truth exists. Instead, there are many truths which can be

discovered in many ways, all of which must be embraced, just as multiple cultures, multiple identities, and multiple voices must be embraced as well.

Similar to the Machiguenga lack of certainty or absolute statements is the lack of any stable notions of identity evinced within their culture. They are a nomadic people, identifying themselves as “the people who walk.” Because of this lifestyle, they have no set home or territory. The modern Western culture has a tendency to equate location with identity as in “I’m a Southerner” or “This is the Smith house.” Meanwhile, this tribe has no specific home, and “their origin was a total mystery; their identity blurred” (81). Even the conditional nature of their names suggests the instability of identity: “Their names were always temporary, related to a passing phenomenon and subject to change: the one who arrives, or the one who leaves...” (83). Postmodern theory recognizes the fact that every individual is forced to adopt various roles throughout one’s life or even throughout one’s day. One man, for instance may have to perform as husband, father, son, brother, uncle, friend, churchgoer, employee, and customer all within a twenty-four-hour period, and all of these identities are based upon the context in which the individual appears.

In his discussion of the relative meaning of words, Saussure makes a statement that, in this context, seems just as relevant concerning individual identity: “The value of just any term is accordingly determined by its environment.... Signs function, then, not through their intrinsic value but through their relative position” (8-10). Just as the members of the Machiguenga tribe experience a relative notion of identity, the modern narrator exhibits a similar experience while discussing the hectic schedule imposed upon him during his work on a television show. As he describes moving rapidly from giving his own academic lectures to conducting interviews for his television program, he states that the job “forced me to become a psychic quick-change artist,

shifting within seconds from a lecturer to a journalist...” (155). At one moment, the narrator is being questioned by those interested in the studies he has accomplished, only to quickly have to adopt a new role and conduct interviews for his own show. Furthermore, the narrator himself is never named. Whenever the narrator presents conversations he has had with Saúl, he always depicts his friend as calling him “pal.” Similar to the Machiguenga, the narrator has no true name. The narrator is the medium through which the reader must witness the events of the narrative, and his lack of any single name signifies a lack of any single stable identity and thus a lack of any central authority for validating the information presented in the novel. In this way, Llosa reveals the mutability of language, of identity, and of reality itself within both cultures.

Finally, one cannot conclude a discussion of Mario Vargas Llosa’s *The Storyteller* without commenting upon the ambiguity of the two voices narrating the novel, an ambiguity that also fits into postmodern theory and challenges the notions of a reliable narrative and a reliable reality. Throughout the novel, Llosa intertwines two different voices. The first is that of an anonymous modern narrator who recalls an old friendship and struggles to learn more of the Machiguenga storytellers so that he might write a book about them. The second voice is apparently that of a Machiguenga storyteller who eventually seems to be the modern narrator’s old friend, Saúl Zuratas. However, the modern narrator begins the novel with a desire to *imagine* his friend *in this role*. Furthermore, the modern narrator discusses his attempts to write an intimate account from the perspective of such a storyteller. Thus, the chapters supposedly narrated by the Machiguenga storyteller could be the narrator’s own attempts to adopt the voice of such a person. Is the novel narrated by two people or one person through two voices? This ambiguity is never resolved.

The Machiguenga storyteller eventually seems to become Saúl Zuratas. Throughout his narrative, the reader discovers that the storyteller originally came from another culture, most obviously a Jewish culture. He also carries a parrot on his shoulder and has a large birthmark over half of his face. These details correspond to the modern narrator's description of Saúl. Finally, the nickname the storyteller gives his parrot is the same nickname Saúl once had, according to the modern narrator, before he abandoned the modern Peruvian culture for that of the Machiguenga (234). Furthermore, the modern narrator, during his quest to speak with a storyteller, encounters a married couple, the Schneills. Their description of one storyteller points directly to Saúl Zuratas: "The other storyteller...the one who was so aggressive...the albino...the gringo...had a huge birthmark...and hair redder than mine...about your [the modern narrator's] age" (179-82). If the Machiguenga storyteller truly is Saúl Zuratas, then Llosa's novel is about the combination of two different cultural voices. Furthermore, it represents Saúl's ability to combine these two voices as he shifts from the modern culture into the culture of an ancient indigenous tribe.

On the other hand, it is possible that the entire novel is being narrated by the modern narrator. If this is the case, then the narrator is adopting two different voices and thus two different identities. He truly is "inventing" Saúl Zuratas in order to create his own image of a Machiguenga storyteller. This could be to explain his friend's mysterious disappearance years ago. However, it could also reflect the narrator's own inability to represent a central figure of a foreign culture without infiltrating that culture with a figure from his own, that of his friend Saúl transformed into a Machiguenga.

The narrative begins with the narrator seeing a photograph of a Machiguenga tribe. In the photo, the modern narrator sees a man who must be a storyteller and who looks remarkably like

his old friend. In this way, it is entirely plausible that this photograph has inspired him to depict his friend in this role, thus creating the alternating chapters narrated by a Machiguenga storyteller. By the end of the novel, the modern narrator states, “I have decided that it is he [Saúl] who is the storyteller in Malfatti’s photograph. A personal decision, since objectively I have no way of knowing” (240). Even he admits that there is no way to be sure. Even if he is only making up these alternating chapters, it is always possible that Saúl actually is out there performing that role.

Ultimately, though, Llosa never provides any resolution to this ambiguity. Is Saúl Zuratas the Machiguenga storyteller and the narrator of those mythical chapters? Are those chapters actually the construction of the modern narrator? Either way, the novel represents the combination of and dialogue between two distinctly different cultures. The metafictional aspects of the novel remind the reader that what appears as stable reality cannot be trusted. In this way, the novel challenges notions of a stable narrative authority, a stable identity, and a stable reality. In the end, either interpretation of the novel’s narration—a combination of the modern narrator and Saúl or just the modern narrator with two voices—is feasible. Coming from the context of the postmodern movement in which there is no stable authority and no absolute truth, Llosa offers no clear-cut resolution, forcing the reader to accept—in true postmodern fashion—both possibilities simultaneously.

Thank you.

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