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Journal

Mester, 29(1)

Author

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Publication Date

2000

DOI

10.5070/M3291014538

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The War of the End of the World by Vargas Llosa: A Reconsideration

Efraín Kristal calls *The War of the End of the World*, 1981, Mario Vargas Llosa's greatest work of literature, a masterpiece to be compared to the novels of Tolstoy or Stendhal (124). José Miguel Oviedo considers it a classic of world literature made from another classic: Euclides da Cunha's *Rebellion in the Backlands* (1902),[1] a Brazilian essay-chronicle with novelistic and epic elements, a work that defies generic categorization. *Rebellion in the Backlands* is the study and narration of the war in and around the town of Canudos, in the northeast of Brazil during 1896-1897. Antonio Consejero, a self-styled, misguided prophet of God who has foreseen the Apocalypse and Final Judgment, has gathered around him the hungry seeking sustenance, the sick needing healing, the outlaws seeking refuge, and the faithful in Christ engaging in solidarity and receiving teachings from their local Messiah. They defy the authority of the Brazilian national government, the Republic, and fight the federal army sent to squelch them. The disastrous consequences of the Canudos rebellion are given in one account of the historical novel by Vargas Llosa as 25,000-30,000 civilian and military rebels dead, with only seven survivors, and 823 federal soldiers killed in battle. The town was razed to the ground by order of the General of the Brazilian army. In the reading of the novel, one gets a sense of the end of utopia or the end of ideology.

At this point, I would like to refer to a historical framework of this theme, the one provided in Russell Jacoby's *The End of Utopia. Politics and Culture in an Age of Apathy* (1999). Mr. Jacoby, a professor of history and education at UCLA, lists a number of precursors to his own book. First and foremost in significance for Vargas Llosa is Karl Popper's *The Open Society and its Enemies*, published in 1945. Very much a product of World War II, this book equates utopianism with totalitarianism, both of which undermine pluralism and diversity, which Popper defends. Plato, Hegel, and Marx are criticized by Popper for their dictatorial utopianism. Second in importance to Vargas Llosa is the British writer, Isaiah Berlin, with his *Four Essays on Liberty*, the first of which dates from 1949, and with his *Against the Current*. Berlin condemns political and social coercion and regulation conducted in the name of total plans, i.e., utopian projects or blueprints for the future. Hannah Arendt and others carried the day, according to Jacoby. I quote:

> In the 1940's and 1950's the prevailing wisdom held that diversity and pluralism were the defining features of American society in particular and the wider tradition of Anglo-American liberalism in general. Totalitarian societies, resting on 'ideology' and 'utopia', were inherently dictatorial (44).

Other intellectuals of occidental culture to discern the end of the viability of ideology and utopia were Albert Camus, in 1946, H. Stuart Hughes in 1951, Raymond Aron in *The Opium of the Intellectuals*, Judith Shklar in *After Utopia: The Decline of Political Faith*, and Daniel Bell in *The End of Ideology* (1960). I have no idea of Vargas Llosa's possible readings of these authors or their influence on him, with the exception of Popper and Berlin. What I am suggesting is a major intellectual theme of the time after World War II, during the Cold War, which Vargas Llosa did not express until after his disenchantment with the left and the Cuban Revolution by the mid-1970's, when he was doing research on the Canudos Rebellion to prepare a movie script never produced. He lectured on Euclides da Cunha at Columbia University in 1976. Of course, his own political evolution, his readings of numerous writers, especially Isaiah Berlin and Karl Popper, and his detailed research into Brazilian history and culture of the late nineteenth century all had something to do with the expression of this theme of the end of ideology or utopia, and with the exposure of fanaticism, which, according to our author, is not limited to any one ideology. In this sense, I think, José Miguel Oviedo refers to the author of *The War of the End of the World* as an impartial author; also, in the sense that Vargas Llosa describes the foibles of so many different characters without playing favorites. The impact on the intellectual of utopian ideas and ideologies for evil purposes in World War II and the Cold War mentioned by Russell Jacoby could be likened to the impact on the Peruvian novelist of his intensive study of the Canudos Rebellion as well as his critical perception of the Velasco leftist dictatorship in Peru and the Fidel Castro dictatorship in the 1970's.

The utopian projects of Modernity originated in the eighteenth century European Enlightenment, as Michel Foucault suggests in his essay, "What is the Enlightenment?". The project for progress, reason, science, and secularization culminated in the French Revolution and its international repercussions. The disenchantment with the French Revolution among the thinkers of the Enlightenment parallels Vargas Llosa's own turn from the political left to the right: in the Canudos Rebellion of northeastern Brazil he finds the paradigm for his commentary on history and ideology.

Now let us consider the disparity between the ideals and the reality in Canudos in *The War of the End of the World*. If the positivist motto on the Brazilian flag guarantees order and progress, if the Christian utopia promises a millenarian paradise on earth, what we actually have described as the prevailing attitudes and situations are the following traits (here are some key words that appear in the novel to establish its tone): narrowmindedness, prejudice, insanity, stupidity, fanaticism, a sensation of the absurd and unreality, confusion, chaos, a grotesque witch's sabbath, cruelty, malice, imbecility. This tone is generalized as well as particularized in numerous characters.

There is a dichotomy of modernity vs. tradition in the novel and a dilemma of multiculturalism in that different world-views reflect incompatible cultures. On the one hand, we have the populist, communal, and theocratic rule of Antonio Consejero originating in the medieval world of Christian messianism and the sixteenth-century messianism of the Portuguese king, Sebastian, who died crusading for his Catholic religion. On the other hand, we have the positivist and secular rule of the Brazilian national government. In other words, juxtaposed are the periphery of the Northeast vs. the center of Rio de Janeiro, the marginal vs. the powerful, and, to an extent, the poor vs. the rich. There is a synchronic conflation of two different epochs in conflict.

In the novel, two ideologies of modernization are ironically intertwined with two ideologies of tradition. The positivist Republicans of the Brazilian national government basically support the project of nineteenth-century Latin American liberalism: separation of Church and State, secular marriage, secular cemeteries, a national census, the metric system, taxes, centralization: all of these are opposed by the Canudos rebels, who are reactionary to modernization. They are supported by Galileo Gall, an anarchist journalist who is the prophet of revolution, wishing to abolish property and equalize the classes and the sexes. He mistakenly sees in the Canudos rebels a vanguard against bourgeois society. The Republican positivists have an equally ironic ally in the Baron of Cañabrava, who comes from the landowning aristocracy supporting the Bahía autonomists and conservatives, officially opposed to the central, liberal government. The paradoxical alliances belie a skepticism about the authenticity or sincerity of ideological motivations. They are either hypocritical or deluded.

Each of the four ideologies harbors a conspiratorial theory about the Canudos movement. Most notorious is the one concocted by Epaminondas Gonçalves, the Republican newspaper editor who sends Galileo Gall, the Scottish anarchist, to support the Canudos rebels in

order to give the false impression that the old Bahía monarchists or autonomists are allied with the rebels and the British monarchy to overthrow the Republic and restore the Brazilian monarchy. He even publishes a sensationalist, false newspaper account of Galileo Gall's death in his purported attempt to supply the rebels with monarchist arms, thus drumming up hatred for the rebels and precipitating the intervention of the Republican Army.

The conspiratorial theory of the rebels is that the Republic is the anti-Christ, the devil supported by atheists, Masons, and Protestants willing to annihilate their religious cult. The anarchist journalist believes the war is a maneuver of bourgeois, capitalist oppression of the poor. Even the usually reasonable Baron of Cañabrava has a conspiratorial theory: he imagines the military in Rio de Janeiro want to use the war to gain influence in overthrowing the civilian President Morais and then establish a Dictatorial Republic, not a democratic one. In each conspiratorial distortion of events, ideology blurs the vision of fanatics. All of these conspiratorial theories as forms of fanaticism contribute to the idea that human passions and irrationality prevail and lead to misunderstanding and destructive propaganda.

Rather than the racial and geographic determinism of Euclides da Cunha concerning the Canudos Rebellion, we have the Vargasllosian determinism of human nature as the principal cause of the war. A pervasive and oppresive presence of the bestial nature of humanity is expressed through similes, metaphors, and comments in the novel. Dog-eat-dog wins out over any cause. The opposing ideologies seem to wear each other out by war and propaganda. The racial and geographic determinism of Da Cunha's *Rebellion in the Backlands* is largely suppressed as a thesis in the novel of Vargas Llosa. There are barely a few lines by a federal captain from Rio about the purported mestizo inferiority of the rebels as a supposed cause of their fanaticism. A federal colonel mentions their ignorance as a cause. No one discusses the solution of public education to enlighten the masses—the priority solution in the nineteenth-century liberal project. This has been left out by the novelist to maximize the pessimism based on the determinism of human nature.

The cycles of drought, worn-out soil, and poverty are not mentioned by the myopic journalist, who is without a proper name as a main character, nor by the Baron of Cañabrava, the two principal discussants of the causes and consequences of the war in the latter part of the novel. Rather, the myopic journalist recognizes as a principal motivation for war the rebels' paranoid fear of the racial and religious census to be

imposed by Republican authorities. They see it as an attempt to reinstate slavery by counting the heads of Negroes and to massacre the faithful by identifying their religion. This lends credibility to the interpretation of a collective persecution complex at the root of the rebellion. It is significantly postponed as an explained motive for the rebellion until near the end. The myopic journalist is thus trying to understand their point of view and become more sympathetic to their attitudes after he himself has escaped the annihilation of Canudos. By then, he points out to the Baron that, in contrast to the Baron's opinion that politics are dirty, Antonio Consejero believed that his rebels were fighting for a just political ideal. Secondly, he thinks that a rebel priest, Joaquim de Cumbe, was somewhat of a hero. Thirdly, he felt that Galileo Gall was an admirable, practical doer who did much to keep the economy of Canudos alive for five months during the war.

The typically postmodern uncertainty of reality is an aspect of the novel that has to do with the nature and identity of the principal narrator, the third-person, semi-omniscient narrator who dominates the narration in most of the novel. From the start, this principal narrator states that it was impossible to know the age, origin, or history of Antonio Consejero. At the same time, the principal narrator occasionally delves into the inner feelings of characters, particularly in the latter part with the myopic journalist and the Baron. Is the principal narrator in fact an eyewitness of the war and a novelist? It is plausible to argue that he is the myopic journalist, alter ego to Euclides da Cunha according to a number of critics. Or is the principal narrator the implied author, an expression of Vargas Llosa's viewpoint about the events? This latter possibility is less likely, for as José Miguel Oviedo states, the author is invisible. There is no single, authoritative version of history, but rather a compilation of different perspectives, with all of their distortions and variations.

Uncertainty of reality is expressed in the ending of the novel. There is clear finality for the two military leaders of the war—Antonio Consejero dies of dyssentry and diarrhea; General Moreira César dies in battle; the two are beheaded and their heads are displayed or inspected to trivialize their mortality. But there is an historical uncertainty about the fate of the rebel João Abade in spite of the Republican authorities' most persistent investigations. Instead, in the end, an old lady among the rural folk swears she saw João Abade's body resurrected to heaven in the company of angels and his soul therefore was saved. The myths of Antonio Consejero's religious cult, then, do not entirely die out. This final myth makes an ironic commentary on the uncertainty of João Abade's fate.

Pervasive in the novel are the typically postmodern use of parody and of intertextuality, or hypertextuality as Gérard Genette would call it. Leopoldo Bernucci, in his excellent book, has studied the many hypotexts, or sources, among the chronicles, newspaper accounts, and novels about the Canudos Rebellion, but especially *Rebellion in the Backlands*, for which Vargas Llosa has professed admiration for its epic quality. In an interview, Vargas Llosa declares his wish to imitate the heroic qualities of medieval epics and romances as well as the action of the nineteenth-century novels of adventures in *The War of the End of the World*. The Enano, or midget, retells the medieval epics and romances in his circus as a form of entertainment; these are hypotexts for characterization. Bernucci refers to the grotesque epic as a peculiar vein of the novel. I would say the novel is practically mock-heroic on occasion. General Moreira César is buffonesque in his gallantry when, mortally wounded, he redacts and signs a last testament on the battlefield to the effect that he did not order the ignominious retreat of his soldiers, that he was courageous to the end.

A parody of the Bible could be read into the novel, especially through the Christ figures and apostles. The less conspicuous of the two Christ figures is Galileo Gall, who must be sacrificed for the Republican cause, which is why Epaminondas Gonçalves orders that Caifás should kill him. He almost dies, but is resurrected after a false notice of his death in the Republican newspaper. Caifás as a name of the New Testament of the Bible is explicitly underscored in the novel by the author: it refers to the chief rabbi who, according to legend, ordered the death of Jesus Christ. Caifás in the novel is vengeful; he thinks that Rufino should kill his unfaithful wife and hopes that Galileo Gall, who cuckolded him by raping his wife, will not die before Rufino can kill him in revenge. Galileo Gall is a secular prophet of revolution, a martyr like the scientist Galileo, his namesake. And he will die, not crucified, but in a hand-to-hand fight to the death with Rufino in a terrific, slow-motion enactment. The other Christ figure, Antonio Consejero, is not crucified either; he is not an authentic Christ nor martyr, his fate seems to suggest, although he has many trappings of imitating the Savior.

María Quadrado, in Antonio Consejero's inner circle of followers, who parodically reenacts the Holy Passion, is called, not the Mother of God, but the Mother of Men—again a denial of Antonio Consejero's divinity. Ironically, she killed her child and is therefore not the Loving Mother she is supposed to be, nor is she virginal like her Biblical counterpart, for she has been raped four times. She is a grotesque parody of the Virgin Mary. León de Natuba is literally Antonio

Consejero's scribe of word and deed and faithful evangelist; with his grotesquely large head on a puny torso, he is a parodic apostle. According to Sandra Fernandes Erickson and Glenn Erickson in their article, "Dialectics in Vargas Llosa's *La guerra del fin del mundo*," published in *Chasqui* (May 1992), León de Natuba corresponds to the Biblical apostle and evangelist, Mark, whose symbol is the lion. Galileo Gall writes a series of journalistic articles of the events of Canudos for the periodical, *The Spark of the Revolt*, published in Lyons, France; he can be considered another eyewitness writer. He writes a testament in the presence of the Baron and corresponds to the Biblical Luke, for the two are doctors. The Enano, who is an oral storyteller, corresponds to John the Divine, the author of one of the four gospels and of Revelation, another story about the end of the world. The symbol for John the Divine is the eagle; the Enano has the eyes of an owl. Just as John protected the Virgin Mary, the Enano protected Jurema and the myopic journalist in Canudos. The myopic journalist, according to Erickson and Erickson, is Saint Matthew, who begins his gospel with the humanity of Jesus, as descendant of David. Likewise, the myopic journalist, if he is in fact the principal narrator of the novel, begins his book with "el hombre", a description of Antonio Consejero. The symbol for Matthew is the angel. The Baron saw something angelical in the myopic journalist. These, and more subtle coresspondences, are pieced together by Erickson and Erickson, who do not actually refer to a novelistic parody of the Bible. I think that the parodic intention of Vargas Llosa is made more evident in that other characters besides the fanatical followers of the religious cult are also modelled after the Biblical evangelists in grotesque fashion. This is not a humorous parody; it is one of pathetic effect. The parody of penitence and crusading as the ways of salvation among the cult followers is gruesome, considering the consequences.

Oviedo has mentioned in his prologue to *La guerra del fin del mundo* the parodic quality of the myopic journalist vis-à-vis Euclides da Cunha. Of course, both are eyewitness journalists of the Canudos Rebellion who work for a Republican newspaper yet comprehend the rebels' motivations, although Vargas Llosa's creation is more sympathetic to them than da Cunha's account. The comical, even satirical, elements in the myopic journalist's physical appearance are evident—the thick glasses, the hanging goose pen, the chronic sneezing allergy, the scarecrow aspect. It may be parodic irony that his eyeglasses are broken, leaving him blind in Canudos as an eyewitness to the war. I see some very human qualities in him. It is in the war that he learns of cowardice and love for the first time. Jurema enamors him. Her name

refers to a plant of the barren backlands that blossoms on the eve of the rainy seasoon, symbolizing life and fertility. She is the symbol of mother nature, mother earth, providing the love of a mistress and the sustenance of a mother. She is called Fortune by Erickson and Erickson because the four men who fall in love with her all see their fortunes changed by her. She is the Wheel of Fortune on which the four men denote high point, low point, ascent, and descent in their fortunes. There is an ironic uncertainty about the fate of Fortune herself, of Jurema. Her disappearance—and we do not know for certain if she dies—bodes ill for the sustainer of life, for mother earth.

I would now like to consider the possibilities of the novel as a microcosm. For the believers of the religious cult, the total destruction of Canudos fulfilled the prophecy of the world Apocalypse. For the Baron, not only Canudos, but also all of history is mixed with the same malice and imbecility. For this Brazilian aristocrat, Canudos is a microcosm for the end of an era in Brazilian history. He concedes to Epaminondas Gonçalves, the Machiavellian, Republican newspaper editor, that power must shift to him as Republican leader. The days of the *coroneis*, the rural bosses and aristocratic landowners, have waned. The regional oligarchy cedes its authority to the Republican national government. Also, according to the Baron, the days of Jacobinism are over at the death of Gen. Moreira César. A more conniving and less stridently dogmatic rule arrives with Gonçalves. Finally, the Baron laments his loss of power and the passing of the old politics, idealized by him as the politics of negotiation, diplomacy, and institutions. Not a word is expressed in this sweet talk of the Bahía landed oligarchy about the former slavery during his rule.

Canudos can be compared to Macondo as a microcosm of Latin America and the world in García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. The Biblical theme of the Apocalypse and the total destruction of the towns in the respective endings are alike. The parody of the Bible and the rôle of prophet/chronicler Melquíades in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is replicated in bifurcated form by Antonio Consejero and the myopic journalist. In each novel, there is an interior duplication by way of reference to the book to be written or deciphered. In both novels there is an increased sense of unreality and the absurd toward the end: Macondo becomes the "paradise of disasters'; Canudos, "the sordid paradise of misery and spirituality." In his monumental study entitled *García Márquez—Historia de un deicidio*, Vargas Llosa analyzes *One Hundred Years of Solitude* with great admiration. The influence of this Colombian novel is present in *The War of the End of the World*, including

the satirical treatment of both sides in a senseless civil war. Is it also the determinism of human nature, as suggested in *The War of the End of the World*, that leads to the disaster and decadence of the Buendía family in García Márquez's novel? They were not always aware of their ominous incest; fate and natural disasters beyond human control seem more decisive in the destruction of Macondo, while human nature can only partially explain the fatal idiosyncracies of the Buendías.

It is not likely that there be a single mouthpiece for Vargas Llosa's ideas and attitudes in *The War of the End of the World*. His ideas are probably dispersed among at least three of the characters, while no one character consistently portrays an alter ego. The first is the Enano, who imaginatively recreates medieval history in his storytelling by dramatizing it and infusing it with human passions, much like Vargas Llosa in his novel. Secondly, we can speculate that Vargas Llosa shares the Baron's equal criticism of both Antonio Consejero and Gen. Moreira César as fanatics. Vargas Llosa, however, would not share the Baron's final disillusionment with politics and the reading of history. The Baron even claims the history of Canudos should not be written, because it is not exemplary or instructive. He claims he will try to prevent the myopic journalist from writing his book about Canudos. Thirdly, there is an undeniable identification between Vargas Llosa's position as chronicler of the Canudos Rebellion and the myopic journalist himself, both comparable to some extent with Euclydes da Cunha. Yet Vargas Llosa—and no doubt the author of *Rebellion in the Backlands*—are more skeptical about the rebels than the myopic journalist, who is won over to their side. It is this skepticism about fanaticism and the use of ideology and utopian thought that distinguishes Vargas Llosa's historical attitudes and associates him with a prevalent, international current of thought after World War II: utopia and ideology have been exhausted by propagandistic abuse. The regional destruction in Canudos has Vargas Llosa sending an anti-apocalyptic message. We are approaching neither the end of history nor the end of the world, he seems to say; we are increasingly skeptical about the truth of one point of view in history or of the ability of the writer to express a totally objective reality. The precursors to Vargas Llosa's thought on history and human nature in *The War of the End of the World* are Montaigne, David Hume, Karl Popper, and Isaiah Berlin; his opponents are Savonarola, Torquemada, Rousseau, and Marx.

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NOTAS

[1] See "Estudio introductorio" (Mario Vargas Llosa, *La guerra del fin del mundo,* Caracas: Biblioteca Ayacucho, 1991.)

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