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## KRISTAL, EFRAIN.
## *Temptation of the Word: The Novels of Mario Vargas Llosa.*
Nashville: Vanderbilt, 1998. 256pp

Following Mario Vargas Llosa's disillusionment with socialism he was ostracized by the Latin American Left that once lionized him. Ever since, his work has often been dismissed with political arguments in academic circles. In *Temptation of the Word*, Efraín Kristal aims to correct this situation by studying the literary merits of Vargas Llosa's novels. In his analysis, Vargas Llosa's political convictions only serve to illuminate the intellectual background that informs his work during different periods of his life. By carefully examining the writer's craft, Kristal is able to demonstrate Vargas Llosa's greatness in the art of the narrative.

Kristal's book focuses primarily on the novels -from *The Time of the Hero* (1963) to *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto* (1997)- but it also incorporates most of Vargas Llosa's prolific work, which includes plays and an extensive collection of essays. Kristal's methodology clearly reflects his view of literature, which as he admits in his "Introduction," has been influenced by critics such as Harold Bloom and George Steiner. Kristal's approach emphasizes the writer's dialogue with literary tradition and his objective is to provide a critical framework that "sheds light on how literary techniques, themes and character types appear, recur and are transformed" (xvi). Purposely staying away from what he calls "technical jargon," Kristal is able to elucidate the process of artistic creation in a manner that can be insightful for scholars as well as for readers less familiar with Vargas Llosa's work.

Kristal's analysis traces the influences –both artistic and intellectual- that inform each of the novels studied. Vargas Llosa's novels, as the writer himself indicates, are drawn from a wide variety of sources including autobiographical, literary, political and historical. But, as Kristal points out, "this does not imply that . . . [his] intention is informative or documentary" (28). In this practice, Vargas Llosa adheres to Flaubertian principles by transforming reality, while avoiding the "temptation" of trying to reproduce it. Thus, Vargas Llosa does not hesitate to distort, modify or "falsify" his sources while fusing them together in imaginative ways: "The literary world that emerges from this process gives the illusion of self-sufficiency and is undoubtedly his own" (30). However, Vargas Llosa's "appropriation" and "amalgamation" of sources has led many critics to focus on extra-literary

issues. Therefore, Kristal specifically states that he "has tried to avoid the fallacy of that literary criticism that overemphasizes Vargas Llosa's realism while overlooking his own inventions" (xvii). Through systematic research, he has been able to identify many of these sources and to highlight the significance of the writer's "recreations." His method allows the reader to appreciate Vargas Llosa's originality while underscoring the fact that it is not the real but the imaginary that matters from a literary perspective.

In a similar fashion, in what is one of the book's greatest contributions, Kristal explores the influence of specific literary works in the creation of Vargas Llosa's novels. He points out thematic, structural and even linguistic connections between these works, and traces the impact of writers such as Faulkner, Conrad, Tolstoy and Hugo on Vargas Llosa's writing. For example, by studying the drafts of Vargas Llosa's novels (housed at Princeton University), he discovers how the author's reading of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* influenced character development in *The Green House*. He also shows how the characters and treatment of time in the construction of *The Time of the Hero* owe a debt to Faulkner's *Light in August*. It is particularly striking to notice the textual similarities he discovers between texts as dissimilar as *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* and Joanot Martorell's *Tirant lo Blanc*. But probably the most fruitful of these connections is the one established between *The Real Life of Alejandro Mayta* and Conrad's *Under Western Eyes*. In this case, intertextuality goes beyond pure "borrowing" and clear parallels between Vargas Llosa's and Conrad's narrator. As Kristal explains, Vargas Llosa's "recreation" entails a correction of Conrad's views on objectivity in literature to reflect his own beliefs:

> The narrator is not concerned with the obvious inconsistencies nor with the difficulties of getting at the truth, because he is not interested in getting at the truth. He is interested in writing a novel, not history, but a novel inspired by the historical events. (144)

Another significant accomplishment of Kristal's book is to dispel the mystery surrounding the apparent complexity in the structure of Vargas Llosa's novels. According to Kristal, "Vargas Llosa's more ambitious novels, such as *The Green House*, are complex but not obscure: most of the apparent contradictions and deliberate ambiguities can be figured out" (48). His analysis of *The Green House*, perhaps the most thorough in the book, exemplifies the possibility of stripping a complex Vargas Llosa novel to its bare bones and using the analysis as a means to interpret the novel's meaning. He starts out by disentangling the various plots and subplots embedded in the novel and explaining the logistics

of the organization of each narrative sequence. He identifies the sources of each of the superimposed stories and explains how they relate to the main plot. He then proceeds to analyze other narrative techniques such as "delayed decodification" or "telescopic dialogues" –terms borrowed from other critics- as well as the way "complex references and hidden facts are combined with a simple plot" (50). His work is that of a detective, leaving the reader with a very clear understanding of the effort and inventiveness involved in the construction of this novel. Referring to *The Green House* itself, Kristal concludes that:

> One of Vargas Llosa's achievements is his capacity to combine the complexity of Faulknerian structures and the Joycean interior monologue with the plots of melodrama and the adventure story. Vargas Llosa's genius as a narrator lies in his ability to bring together complexity and simplicity and to make use of other works of literature in that process. (51)

*Temptation of the Word* is organized in five chapters that study Vargas Llosa's twelve novels in chronological order. The novels are discussed in Chapter 2: "The Novels of the 1960s," Chapter 3: "The Transition," Chapter 5: "The Novels of the 1980s." and in the "Conclusion." This division follows the writer's intellectual development over each period of time. Chapter 1: "The Writer's Commitment" and Chapter 4: "Against Wind and Tide" introduce the historical background and the intellectual influences that shed light on Vargas Llosa's ideological commitments. Figures such as Mariátegui, Salazar Bondy and Moro represent his early influences, while the readings of Camus, Berlin, Revel, Popper, and Bataille illuminate his more recent views.

The political content of Vargas Llosa's novels and his literary techniques changed significantly as he distanced himself from socialism and embraced neoliberalism in the 1980s. However, at all times, his literary convictions have faithfully reflected his political beliefs. The novels of his socialist period portray a corrupt capitalist society that is beyond reform. The novels of his transitional period, reiterate the themes of the 1960s, trading his pessimism for humor and irony. The novels of the neoliberal period delve into fanaticism as a source of violence and other social evils, and consider the possibility of channeling such passions through literature. *The War of the End of the World* (1981), which according to Kristal is Vargas Llosa's best novel, reflects unprecedented depth and also coincides with this change in his view of humanity:

> *The War of the End of the World* is a contribution to a literary tradition, including masterpieces by Stendhal and Tolstoy, about the propensity of humanity to idealize violence, either with the

> visions of the idealist or with the abstractions of the intellectual who fails to comprehend war–the most devastating collective experience of all. (124)

In the "Conclusion" of *Temptation of the Word*, Kristal reflects on Vargas Llosa's future direction, which he believes we have glimpsed in his 1993 novel *Death in the Andes*. In this novel, for the first time, violence takes place for no discernible reason. Despite Kristal's evident admiration for Vargas Llosa's work, he seems to think that it has yet to reach its climax: "He has not, however, ventured into the most complex theme in moral literature, the recognition by an individual of his personal guilt or responsibility for his own suffering or that of others" (198).

While political concerns have always been prevalent in Vargas Llosa's writing, Kristal foresees a new stage, exemplified by his most recent play, *Ojos Bonitos, Cuadros Feos* (1996), in which artistic concerns take precedence. Kristal emphasizes that Vargas Llosa's view of literature has been the one true constant throughout his work:

> Literature, for Vargas Llosa, is no longer a way to diagnose the evils of social injustice as he vehemently argued in the 1960s. It is a compensation for the imperfections inherent to the human condition. It is a controlled way for writers and readers to explore and perhaps exorcise those darker aspects of themselves that can endanger open societies . . . Vargas Llosa's views about the irrationalist nature of literary creation have remained the same for three decades. What has changed is his attempt to link them to a political vision. (119)

One crucial theme developed in Kristal's book is the critical reception of Vargas Llosa's work at different stages of his literary career. Because of the clear connection between his political views and his literary creations, literary criticism of Vargas Llosa has been confrontational, primarily based on a political standpoint. As Kristal points out, "One of the troubling fallacies in Vargas Llosa literary criticism –practiced by tendentious critics and by eminent literary figures alike- is to confuse the merits of Vargas Llosa's novels with the merits of their political content" (xiv). In his analysis of Vargas Llosa literary criticism, Kristal demonstrates how the same particular work could be praised and degraded by the same critic before and after Vargas Llosa's break with the Latin American Left. In one representative case, Kristal proves that the same individual used identical criterion to call Vargas Llosa a progressive writer in 1968 and a "bourgeois" writer in 1971.

Perhaps Kristal's greatest achievement in this book has been to condense his thorough analyses of Vargas Llosa's twelve novels, combined with his intellectual biography and a discussion of his criticism,

in a book of 256 pages. It is evident that Kristal has more to say about each of the novels, but that he chose to offer only a sample of his discoveries about Vargas Llosa's creative process. Even though the book is about the novels, some readers may wish that it contained equally thorough analyses of the author's plays and essays. Nevertheless, we are left with a critical framework that can be applied to the rest of Vargas Llosa's work. In the end it becomes clear that the intellectual project behind *Temptation of the Word* is a defense of literature. With it, Kristal provides a new paradigm for the study of other Latin American authors whose work has suffered from the same critical biases that Vargas Llosa's literature has endured.

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