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## **“Historia de Mayta” Vargas Llosa’s**

*Fourth International leader reviews new novel  
about Peruvian revolutionist*

The Real Life of Alejandro Mayta is the story of a shattered dream, of the impossible or forbidden passage from fiction to reality. Its central thread is an investigation – a “quest” Vargas Llosa told *Le Monde* (Nov. 16, 1984) – to reconstruct the story of Mayta, a Trotskyist, homosexual, and guerrilla of the first period,<sup>1/</sup> through the fragmentary and contradictory recollections of those who knew him.

In this way, little by little, a jigsaw puzzle of the past comes together, silhouetted against the contemporary backdrop of an “apocalyptic Peru” that is totally falling apart, headed for a new “war of the end of the world,” in which ideologies and blocs confront one another through shadows and puppets, culminating in brutal, meaningless, endless violence.

In “its absurdity and tragedy,” the sad and insignificant history of Mayta therefore appears, by contrast, as “a premonition,” coming as it did before the victory of Castro and the focuista passion of the 1960s. In Vargas Llosa’s words, it is “an x-ray of the Peruvian misfortune.”

### **This “great tiredness...”**

The novelist’s investigation takes up Mayta at a crossroads in his life, where doubt and

<sup>1/</sup> *Historia de Mayta*, by Mario Vargas Llosa, Barcelona, 1984, 346 pp. The novel tells the story of Alejandro Mayta Avendaño, a member of the Revolutionary Workers Party [POR(T)] who organized an abortive uprising in 1958 in the Andean town of Juaja, Peru. -IP

faith, enthusiasm and disillusionment, relentlessly confront each other. The narrator works a wrenching process that flows from the crisis of the militant to the crisis of his cause, from the revolutionary to the revolution. By its nature this process involves a choice, a taking of sides. It turns the revolution into a subjective fiction. From the start it downplays the revolution’s social and historic necessity.

From fragmented remembrances, the personality of Mayta emerges bit by bit as an intransigent moralist (who at the age 15 carried out an individual and private kind of hunger strike in solidarity with the poor), a dissident by vocation (who broke with the church, then with the Communist Party, and finally with his small Trotskyist group to retreat into his irreducible solitariness.)

He is an “ascetic,” a “suicidal” character who refuses to “give in to feelings,” which in his own words means to “soften,” to “bend,” to “make these small concessions that undermine morale.” The very choice of the term is unusual, to “give in to feelings” seems misplaced: is Mayta frustrated, a perverse monk? Everything suggests that.

Vargas Llosa concentrates on Mayta’s “self destructive tendency,” his tendency toward “heresy, toward organic rebellion,” as someone for whom “dissenting” is almost second nature. Vargas seems fascinated by a type of pathology of rebellion. He does not see any need to seriously question the norm because he is dazed by a search for political purity that leads to unreality, to an ultimate level of dissidence, whose source is “more emotional or ethical than ideological.”

The radical imperative of the absolute shatters on the trivial, ultra-mundane reality of the real revolution: “a broad patience, and infinite routine, something terribly sordid,

with a thousand and one examples of selfishness, a thousand and one villainies, a thousand and one...”

By attempting to force the course of historic reality, vision and the imagined history degenerate into totalitarianism. However, the tragedy of Mayta is that he is not a blind fanatic, but rather an already partially lucid intransigent as shown by his formulas, which parallel those of Vallejos’ sister, the nun, who is his companion in arms: “Who told you that faith is incompatible with doubts?” or “We lost the false illusions, but not the faith.”

Thus Vargas Llosa again makes the facile analogy between religious faith and political faith, without asking himself about the possible differences between the two. In the final analysis, revolutionary commitment does not take as its starting point any guarantee of a divine character, nor any scientific-type certainty in the future. This itself leaves the individual with full responsibility for his choices and acts: the militant decides his life as a whole on the basis of a reasoned wager and some probabilities. Based on these, he places absolute energy at the service of what are necessarily relative certainties. If you can use the word “faith,” this rational faith, which contains neither paradise nor purgatory, has nothing to do with mystical grace.

The “tiredness” that Vargas Llosa discovers in an old photo of Mayta is probably the product of a long overhaul over this narrow path: “A tired man ... Of not having slept enough, of having been on foot too long, or, perhaps, something that goes back afar, the tiredness of a life that has reached a limit, not yet old age, but might just be, if behind it there is – as in Mayta’s case – nothing but frustrations, errors, hostilities, political betrayals, malice, tasteless food, prison, police stations, the under-

ground, failures of every kind and nothing that even looks like a victory”.<sup>2/</sup> And yet, on this exhausted face is still inscribed this “secret integrity” that causes him “to react; ... against any injustice” and this “righteous conviction that the only unpostponable, the most urgent, task was to change the world.”

### **The Confusion of Values**

Only in the last chapter does Vargas Llosa reveal the last word of the enigma that has run through the whole novel: what is it that was able to grab hold of Mayta’s passion, destroy him and reduce him to a ghostly street seller of ice cream? The author maintains that it was not the failure of his short-lived epic nor even the unjustified years of prison. It was the discovery that the revolutionary actions to which he devoted himself to cross the dangerous bridge leading from fiction to reality had lost their political substance and were “objectively” reduced to common crimes.

And Vargas Llosa delivers his message to us: his rejection of subversive violence and of the theories that imprison reality or forcibly mutilate it. The sole salvation that Vargas accepts lies in the path of reforms: “It is difficult to admit that the solution might be gradual, that mediocrity is preferable, in terms of reforms, to an absolute perfection that does not exist.” And by contrast, Vargas asks himself whether Mayta’s “minuscule insurrection is not the start of all those ideologies that present violence as the solution for Latin America” (*Le Monde*, Nov 16, 1984). Behind Mayta are not only Marx, Lenin, or Trotsky, but also Guevara, Fonseca, and so many others who are repudiated as promoters of totalitarianism.

<sup>2/</sup> Editors note: this quote was missing from the English translation. It has been translated and added by Darren Roso.

Perhaps disenchanted militants of the post-Franco period in Spain might allow themselves to be seduced by the evocation of the alienation of the militant through the case of Mayta. The same thing might happen when the book is published in France.

However, you cannot separate the pieces of Vargas Llosa’s reasoning: it is a consistent reasoning that appears in *The War of the End of the World*. Paradoxically, on the pretext of establishing a realistic policy against a violence that has degenerated to the point of madness, Vargas Llosa’s opposition to the reality of ideologies forces him to invent a built-to-order reality that is as imaginary as it is fleeting: democratic institutionalization in Latin America. Since this path is choked off by the crisis, the growing imperialist domination, the daily misery, his counterposition of the reasonable “mediocrity” of reforms to the impossible revolutionary perfection is illusory. To cling to this illusion leads in practice to establishing a right-wing policy.

### **The Literary Failure**

In contrast to Vargas Llosa’s previous novels, by its structure and its conclusion *Historia de Mayta* explicitly assumes a political and esthetic manifesto, which is perfectly summarized in the interview in *Le Monde*: “At the same time, it is a novel about fiction: fiction in literature, fiction in politics. Positive fiction and negative fiction. Positive fiction is literary fiction, one that recognizes itself as such, that invents, that surpasses reality and creates a different reality that consoles you. Negative fiction is fiction that does not recognize itself as such, that claims to be the truth the rational description of reality.”

But this novel itself illustrates the failure of the attempt. Whatever might be its inter-

est, it is a poor novel. Vargas Llosa stumbles over a literary endeavor that has no known solution: to bring the modern revolutionary militant into literature.

In their mythical abstraction, the characters of Antonio Conselheiro and his cangaço chiefs took on a powerful reality in *The War of the End of the World*. Each in his way appeared with epic presence. By contrast, Mayta remains a vague, unintegrated silhouette: we can feel affected by one or another of his features, have a political dialogue with him, feel fondness, but Mayta does not exist. He fades along with the impressions he has left in weak or ill-intentioned remembrances.

There is a deep-seated reason for this narrative failure. Since its classical epoch in the 19th century, the novelistic drama has dealt with a subject who is divided between public man and private man, a division rooted in the deepest part of his being, and potentially neuroticized in his relation with collectivity. But the authentic revolutionary militant, though a commitment that unifies theory and practice, reestablishes a deep relationship between the individual and the historic totality in motion and tends to overcome this disconnection. Of course, this does not end contradictions, but they are different from the ones that characterize the novelistic drama: their historic reality always exceeds, overflows, their literary equivalent and renders it ridiculous.

Under the pen of the narrator only an empty shell or a caricature appears: the militant, his existential density, does not belong to the same world as the narrator and resists being possessed by the novel.

The Revolution belongs to drama, or to comedy, but certainly not to the novelistic genre. It would be worthwhile to reflect on why the great revolutions of this century have

not had worthy narrative expression. The Stalinist novels are moralizing fables. Those novels worthy of the name that do deal with the theme of revolution have always done so through repentant, disenchanted, or marginal militants. It would be a bit simple to explain the phenomenon by arguing that the militant who is not in crisis and has not abandoned the struggle belongs to an inhumane, mechanical universe, outside any possible esthetic creation.

Because, on the contrary, the relationship of the militant to others and to the collectivity takes place through forms that do not completely correspond to those of classical psychology, with which the novel maintains a profound connection.<sup>3/</sup>

### **History Rebels**

Mayta, the militant, is no exception to this rule. Even when he breaks with the party or the group, he refuses to bow his head, he firmly rejects sinking into “his story.” In the final analysis, this stubborn ethereal quality gives him a grandeur, independent of the author’s will. Sensing that Mayta’s personality is slipping through the lines and is escaping from him, Vargas Llosa forces his features in order to better confine him and, doing this, inevitably falls into caricature. For example, why make his hero a homosexual? Mayta could perfectly well have been a Trotskyist, guerrilla, and

homosexual, but he wasn’t. Then why add this feature? “To accentuate his marginality,” the author tells us, “his condition as a man full of contradictions.” If this is the reason, he could have also made him a Jew or Black.

Novelistic realism means “to lie with understanding of cause,” Vargas Llosa repeats various times, to the point of thereby establishing a rule of his esthetic. This would be the only way to write stories on the basis of histories. This distance between stories and histories, this subtle variation of just two letters, this necessary lie, is however the sign of an impossible project, which ends in simple sleight of hand. Fiction falsifies history, claiming to grasp its strength of reality and conviction.<sup>4/</sup> And as would be expected, history rebels: Mayta escapes from his author, completely dominating him in human and moral terms (at least the Mayta that you can make out beyond the book, who would be the subject of a magnificent biography, but not a novel written by a literati absolutely incapable of understanding him).

In one part of the novel, this pale reflection of Mayta says: “I want to be what I am. I am a revolutionary, with flat feet. I am also a homo... For this there needs to be a revolution... a different revolution. No one that is half-way, but the authentic, integral revolution... where no one for any reason feels ashamed to be what he is.” Words, words... a speech from a meeting, dead phrases fallen from Mayta’s tree. Also the language totally escapes concrete reality and becomes devoid of substance.

Thus the Mayta trapped in Vargas Llosa’s web is only a pale copy, a type of cardboard figure. And the author bestows tender commiseration upon this cardboard figure, the indulgence of an adult toward a child, as a

studied homage to a warehouse of lost causes. However, Mayta does not say his last work. First of all, what is the value of certain “won” causes? And who gets the final say on whether a cause is “won” or lost? Who is the judge and what is his law?

Vargas Llosa, with his sweeping rejection of what he calls “political fiction” – which he classifies negatively, accepting only literary fiction – in fact capitulates to reality as it is. On principle he rejects the enormous efforts of consciousness and imagination that make up great social transformations, the creative utopias of the revolutions that, forging their own road, carve out a history without any predestination.

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*[The translation from the Spanish is by Intercontinental Press. Quotations from Mario Vargas Llosa’s book and Le Monde were translated from the original.]*

<sup>3/</sup> At least until the great Proustian revolution. Since then there have been some metaphysical novels (Lowry), novels that express the conflicts of particular social categories (the female novel of V. Woolf, D. Lessing, or M. Duras), or of a baroque variant of particular societies (Márquez, Carpentier, or there is even a novel of dissidence (Solzhenitsyn). But in it we do not find the classical novelistic subject.

<sup>4/</sup> The story of Matya is also full of allusions to the contemporary history of Latin America, from the death of Che to the origins of “Sendero Luminoso.”