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BOOK REVIEWS

LANGUAGE, ABSENCE, AND NARRATIVE IMPOSSIBILITY IN MARIO VARGAS LLOSA'S *EL HABLADOR*

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In *El hablador*, published in 1987, Mario Vargas Llosa considers the absences that emerge between oral and written discourses and the potential impossibility of reconciling these often opposing narrative models. The binary of oral/written is but one of the many binary oppositions introduced by Vargas Llosa is *El hablador*. What Vargas Llosa investigates is whether an (imagined) oral story can be written, and if it cannot be, what falls out of the story, the narrative, in the negotiation of this space between written and oral story-making: *El hablador* figures as a written text dependent on a culture of orality for its momentum. This implicit textual contradiction is perhaps not entirely reconciled by Vargas Llosa, but in writing the novel he introduces the duplicitous nature of storytelling—in written or oral form. If storytelling is (or has been made), as Walter Benjamin suggests, obsolete, is Vargas Llosa attempting to pose an investigation of the impossibility of telling stories in a modern(ist) moment? Is this an impossibility that forces the literary postmodern to emerge? Perhaps so. Vargas Llosa's narrator, a scholar with Romantic predilections and modernist tendencies, sets himself a goal of reconstituting the story of a Machiguenga Indian storyteller—he hopes to somehow possess the unpossessable and he hopes to do so in a novel which he has, for many years, been unable to write. Eventually Vargas Llosa's narrator succeeds in writing his Machiguenga text by invoking a mythic Machiguenga storyteller, a storyteller who is revealed to be a recasting of his own long-lost friend Saúl Zuratas. The interspersed narratives, one "oral" and one written, of *El hablador* demonstrate the narrative contrivance of Vargas Llosa's narrator. This narrator, to reconcile the binary between written and oral storytelling, has

reimagined his absent friend Zuratas as the mythic and mysterious Machiguenga storyteller, thus co-opting the passion of his friend and using it to propel his text. The imagined Zuratas also serves to satiate the narrator's desire to *know in writing* a tribe that has for so long eluded him. Yet, by invoking a pseudo-Zuratas (an imagined Zuratas) to tell his story of the Machiguenga, the narrator's primary conflict emerges. Each discourse—written and oral—persists in retaining its own autonomy (oral cannot mix with written, and written cannot mix with oral) and the text remains fractured between oral and written. The narrative strategies pull in opposite directions causing significant absences to emerge, most notably (or visibly) in the separations between chapters. These textual absences serve as the spaces in which the irreconcilable problems of binaries remain. Despite attempts to create a joint between written and oral, the narrator, in effect, fails. The articulation of this failure, however, demonstrates Vargas Llosa's success in creating a narrative veritably in shambles that ultimately coheres, that succeeds in conveying a "story." The essence of Vargas Llosa's narrator's failure, however, is this—he can no more effectively form a hybrid method of storytelling than he can create a true hybrid "Civilized" (by Western standards) Machiguenga or a culturally-acceptable "marginal." Perhaps the impossibility of resolution, and the persistence of the absence, is, after all, the *only truth* of this narrative.

The narrator of *El hablador* figures as a curious conduit through which two concurrent stories flow. One trajectory of the narrative relates the story of the narrator's own professional life and relationship with his friend Saúl Zuratas. This narrative alternates with a rather fragmentary tale of Machiguenga Indian cosmogony and lore. Vargas Llosa weaves these two narrative strains together, yet the complication of the text lies not only in this dual narrative focus. More problematic than the seeming incompatibility of the narratives is the ethical (and literary) orientation informing each narrative strain. The narrator, as the director of the narrative, owns its language in many respects. Yet this ownership is undermined by the completely foreign nature of the Machiguenga language and culture. To posses words to such a degree that they can be recorded in written signs indicates a certain assimilation with a cultural master-narrative. To record a culture's words as one's own denotes the placement of the writer as a participant in the culture (either as a sympathetic or antipathetic participant). This is the manner in which the narrator of *El hablador* is situated. He can record the words of another culture only through translation (or appropriation of an imagined language), only by somehow bringing these words into his own cultural and

literary horizon. Yet, there is no complete ownership of language here. By attempting to reconstitute the Machiguenga narrative, as told by an elusive storyteller (the imagined/projected Zuratas), the narrator devises a way to finally control an otherwise uncontrollable narrative. He imagines the Machiguenga and their storytelling rituals, and only by the projection of these tales as filters of his cultural assumptions can a semi-linear narrative emerge which makes sense to Western(ized) readers. The narrator cannot fully abandon his assumptions about Zuratas or the Machiguenga in order to tell their story—he cannot absorb their language as his own. Zuratas, similarly (and as depicted by the narrator), cannot fully appropriate the Machiguenga language as his own—he cannot belong to the language as one belongs to a mother (to paraphrase Jacques Derrida). Hence, neither man can fully posses language, either orally or in written form, and what emerges between these narratives of impossibility is a dense and pervasive absence in the text. What exists in this absence is the refuse of language—the words that cannot be written and the words that cannot be spoken. The narrator, in effect, can ultimately control neither.

Vargas Llosa's text is the telling of a story, and in terms of the events which propel the narrative, Vargas Llosa's designs can be revealed in a relatively straightforward manner. A narrator, not unlike the "real" Vargas Llosa himself, is consumed by a thirst for knowledge of the Peruvian Machiguenga Indians, a tribe of native people who live in (or wander through) the Urubamba river valley in Southeastern Peru. This same tribe also fascinated the narrator's college friend Zuratas. After having lost touch with Zuratas, the narrator persists in retaining a periodically suspended interest in the Machiguenga. Zuratas, like the Machiguenga, is also always somewhere in the narrator's mind, although they have been out of touch for many years. The narrator resists linearity from the onset; it is problematized by the discord within Zuratas as related in conversations recorded by the narrator (conversations which occurred while the two were in college). The two men were interested in the Machiguenga, however for Zuratas this passion was almost desperate; he was fascinated by the Machiguenga storytellers, independent men who told the history of the culture to the people while concurrently serving as the repositories of all tribal lore and gossip. The Machiguenga storytellers then managed to exist in a position of absolute necessity for the tribe—they were the veritable focal points of the culture. Serving as such a focal point was an impossibility for Zuratas in the Westernized Peruvian "mainstream"—he was ostracized due to a disfiguring birthmark and his religious affiliation (Judaism). The narrator implies that

these two factors limit the realms in which Zuratas could operate. Thus, it was this alienation that compelled Zuratas to create a new space for himself. This "new" space, ultimately, was (as imagined by the narrator) that of a Machiguenga storyteller.

The narrator reveals that Zuratas, otherwise known as Mascarita (little mask) due to his disfiguring facial birthmark, felt a "love at first sight for the tribal Indians" (28). Zuratas's passionate attraction to the Machiguenga is motivated by a distinct love for them. He wants to love them as he feels they deserve to be loved. Concurrently, he feels that perhaps they *can love him*; the narrator suggests that Zuratas's affiliation with the Machiguenga was born out of his own marginality: "Had he unconsciously identified with those marginal beings because of the birthmark that made him, too, a marginal being, every time he went out on the streets?" (28). If the answer to this proposed question is "yes," the motivation for Zuratas's exile from civilization would be straightforward. Yet the narrator can never become privy to an "answer" and it is plausible that Zuratas's reasons for his feeling of kinship with the Machiguenga are far more complex than any marginality held in common. If there is "marginality," there is an established, while delimited, space of existence—a space, albeit, on the outside of the "acceptable." For Zuratas, there really was not a plausible space of marginality, there was only a dense, pervasive absence. He refuses to accept being relegated to a position of marginality because this would foreground the notion that there is a space that is within a certain cultural text while he is forced to exist in its margins. Rather, Zuratas chooses a radical dislocation for (of) himself—he chooses to remove himself from a culture that relies upon the use of lines of separation (lines demarcating the margins). This is a proactive self-removal. While much of the story of Zuratas in *El hablador* is conjecture, what the narrator does *know* is that Zuratas has indeed "gone away"; he has opted out of a stultifying and tortured existence in a society that forcibly draws lines. Indeed, all societies "draw lines"—what matters is *where* and how immutably these lines are drawn.

In order to "make sense" of the absence of his college friend, the narrator *creates* a narrative to explain the reasons for his disappearance (his "marginality"). The Machiguenga fit well into this narrative explanation. For the narrator to reconcile himself to the unanswerable aspects of the mysterious Machiguenga culture and to the disappearance of Zuratas, he "decides" that it must be Zuratas whom he sees in a picture hanging in a gallery in Firenze. The picture is of a Machiguenga storyteller, and for the narrator to have *narrative*, this focal figure *must*

be Zuratas. Hence, the narrator "realizes" that Zuratas has joined the Machiguenga tribe as a storyteller (a reality that emerges piece by piece over the course of the narrative), and certain significant questions emerge about the possibility of assimilation within a culture of which one is not a part by birth. While Zuratas was not ever absorbed into "civilized" Peruvian culture and felt a certain kinship with the Machiguenga even before he joined them as they "walked," Vargas Llosa allows his narrator to remain partially unconvinced of Zuratas's ability to become acculturated to Machiguenga life entirely. The narrator remains unsure of himself and his Machiguenga text, and this uncertainty emerges via a rendering of Zuratas as the Machiguenga storyteller. This discordance is revealed in the glitches of Zuratas's telling of Machiguenga cosmology—Zuratas cannot help but infuse the Machiguenga lore with his own insight into what is "right" and what is "wrong." The narrator reveals that it is Machiguenga custom to commit infanticide if a child in born imperfect. The imagined Zuratas weaves a critique of this practice into his tales. Yet, it must be reiterated that this rendering of Zuratas's tales to the Machiguenga tribespeople is delivered by the narrator—this is how he conceives of Zuratas's role as a storyteller. The narrator has finally found a way to write about the Machiguenga, and conjuring up an image of his lost friend Zuratas, with his parrot on his shoulder, is the only way in which the narrator can effectively compose his Machiguenga tale.

The text traces the narrator's attempt to both write about his college friend and to write about a tribe he has never quite been able to mentally posses. As Sara Castro-Klarén has argued, there is always something just beyond the reach of the narrator who writes the text concerning his friend Zuratas and the Machiguenga. He cannot envision a totality, and in trying to force a unity he peremptorily creates explanations for events which cannot but slip through his fingers. According to Castro-Klarén, "The novel's polyglossia will plot the notion that the ethnographer's [the narrator's] discourse is but the simulacrum of his desire and that its truth status is no different from that of the fiction the novelist simultaneously crafts" (47). The narrator needs a narrative line to grasp hold of; he, in effect, is afraid of the absence into which his friend Zuratas seems to have jumped. In order to make sense of this leap of faith (in the Kierkegaardian sense), the narrator creates a history, a complex tribal cosmogony, that *never truly existed* in the way in which he represents it. This is a simulacral history used to aid him in making sense of something completely beyond the scope of his Western, civilized reasoning. While the narrator cannot fully conceive of the circumstances of the "leap," despite the few pieces of information regarding Zuratas that he has

gathered from friends and other resources, he can *attempt* to craft a "whole" narrative. Yet, rather than effectively creating a *whole* explanatory and satisfying narrative, the narrator cannot help but craft a narrative that is full of significant *holes*.

Castro-Klarén has also confronted the issue of the narrator's appropriation: "[the narrator] has appropriated Zuratas's most personal desire and made it his own" (211). Zuratas did indeed hope to fully understand Machiguenga culture, and this is the trait that the narrator adopts. The narrator turns Zuratas into an answer, his answer. The fictive Zuratas, the Zuratas who becomes the Machiguenga storyteller captured in the gallery picture, was *created* by the narrator. This aspect of the text poses a problem for Castro-Klarén, for she believes that this potentially allows for the fictionality of the rendering of the plight of the Machiguenga to weaken the actual political gravity of the overarching narrative commentary. Castro-Klarén argues: "That [the narrator] has *decided* to make of the man in the photograph the figure of Zuratas would seem to remove the consequences of the novel's discourse from the realm of history and claim for it a purely fictional, fabricated status" (221). Even if this is so, however, Castro-Klarén insists that the deeper "cultural problems" and related commentary remain resonant despite the fictional aspects of the text. By removing the "truth" (the socio-political "truths" of the day-to-day lives of Peru's real indigenous peoples) further and further from the reader, perhaps Vargas Llosa is asserting that there are no truths that are self-disclosing. These "answers," again, emerge only in the absences in the text, in the spaces, or "holes," between the inlaid narrative schemes. It is in these spaces where one might *hear* some semblance of a language of truth. Hence, by latently suggesting that there exists a kind of truth in orality (the culture of the Machiguenga), Vargas Llosa claims that there is a truth which lies even beyond the grasp of his narrator who attempts to force an oral narrative (and culture) into the parameters of a Western, written narrative structure (the novel the narrator attempts to write) and civilization.

Hence, since the narrative of the Machiguenga is filtered through the narrator, and thus its "truth" is obscured, the reader never sees the "real" Zuratas or the "real" Machiguenga (although while there may not have been a historical Saúl Zuratas there is indeed a tribe of Indians called the Machiguenga). Zuratas's voice is not his own, yet in the narrator's rendering of Zuratas's existence as a storyteller many resonant aspects of language and ownership are addressed. By infusing the Machiguenga history with aspects of his own history, the projected Zuratas demonstrates that one cannot ever truly "belong." Zuratas cannot belong to his

own people (Peruvians or Jews) or to his adopted Machiguenga tribe; the cultural forces are internecine and illuminate the unreality of the "hablador" Zuratas himself. As María Isabel Acosta Cruz has argued, "[Zuratas's] belief in leaving the Indians alone is contradicted by the praxis of the hablador's last text. By becoming an hablador he already transgresses his theory of nonintervention, and by his use of intertextuality he betrays his intent of preserving the Machiguenga culture..." (139). This intertextuality is of paramount importance; Zuratas cannot abandon the influence of various literary (Kafka, for one) and cultural/religious (Jewish) texts, *even in his role as an hablador.*

In one of the stories the narrator's projected Zuratas tells to the tribe as he walks, he includes reference to a favorite literary figure of his, Gregor Samsa of Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (the "real" Zuratas felt that this figure was especially applicable to the realities of his life in "cultured" Peru). The hablador Zuratas introduces a story of a "buzz-buzz bug" thus: "A Gregor-Tasurinchi. I was lying on my back. The world had grown bigger, it seemed to me. I was aware of everything. Those hairy-ringed legs were my legs" (203). He is, concurrently, Gregor Samsa and Franz Kafka and Saúl Zuratas and the hablador; he shares with Kafka a feeling of alienation due to his ancestral religion, Judaism, and the unshakable anxiety caused by his physical presence, an anxiety he feels imbues his whole being, his whole spirit. In this tale he tells the Machiguenga with whom he walks, the hablador Zuratas cannot avoid infusing the oral text with markers of a life he cannot fully escape; he spins out a tale of hybridity. He tells the tale of being a "Gregor-Tasurinchi." This conflation of cultural signifiers connotes an impassable barrier; it exhibits the potential impossibility of complete assimilation or acceptance (in *any* culture). In allowing Zuratas to "join" the tribe, in whatever capacity, the Machiguenga do, in effect, *change* (for Zuratas/due to Zuratas) and do demonstrate one important marker of cultural survival: adaptability (the very feature Zuratas hoped to neutralize in them). Yet, it must be noted that the impossibility of Zuratas's total assimilation (and absorption into an ideally static culture) is evident only in the reconstituted tale as told by the imagined Zuratas, the Zuratas who is a projection of all of the narrator's beliefs and concerns about both the Machiguenga and his long-lost friend. M. Keith Booker puts it concisely:

> ...we must keep in mind that neither Vargas Llosa nor his modern narrator could have possibly had direct access to Saúl's stories to the Machiguengas. Thus, the hablador chapters are not really Saúl's narrations at all but are in fact simulations created by the Western narrator as

> projections of his own notions of Machiguenga storytelling. (131)

For the narrator, there was no logical way for Saúl to entirely abandon the influences of "civilized" Peruvian culture, and the intertextuality that emerges in the transcribed accounts, or "stories," suggests that the narrator is aware of the eclipsing power of the forces of the modern "civilized" impulse. Such an impulse cannot be extracted from one's identity. The narrator does create a Zuratas who in some ways resembles the "real" Zuratas of his college years, but this *hablador* Zuratas is, as Booker argues, "the modern narrator's Romantic fantasy of what a storyteller might have been in some ideal past time when narration still provided an effective means for the conveyance of experience" (131). Such reconstituted tales of mythology and cosmogony are densely saturated with the narrator's own fantasies—he would like to believe (as Benjamin suggests) that there was a time when the art of oral storytelling was a necessary facet of communal coherence. Yet, in *El hablador*, Vargas Llosa gives no "real evidence in the text that Saúl ever becomes an hablador at all" (Booker 131).

Here another gap emerges. The reader is never privy to the "real" Saúl Zuratas. Zuratas is always a shadowy figure, a valiant protector of the besieged Machiguenga who boldly smiles in the face of those who insult him and sneer (or laugh) at his birthmark. This Zuratas is idealized by the narrator, but nonetheless, he is ineffectual. As mentioned above, he cannot be separated from his cultural ties—he is, and will always be, the scarred child of a Jewish father and a mother who was a "Creole from Talara" (10). His mother was never accepted in the Jewish community in Lima; she was exoticized by her ancestry. Her son Saúl leverages this inborn exoticism, both physical and religious, into a life quest for himself—he becomes a man, as the narrator presents him, whose belief in the integrity and importance of the Machiguenga eclipsed all other aspects of his life (including these aspects of heredity). This is how the narrator remembers Zuratas and how he displays him to the reader. In many respects, Zuratas is unassailable—the narrator protects him even when weaving internal critiques of him into the narrative. At the onset of *El hablador*, the narrator relates that he was indeed friends with Zuratas, but only "insofar as it is possible to be friends with an archangel" (8). Zuratas was unapproachable, always dislocated, always dispossessed of family, language, and nationality. He could not fully espouse any popular cause and became an even more curious figure to the narrator. Zuratas was devoted and committed to the cause of the Machiguenga—this

cause, according to the narrator, "transformed Zuratas, erasing all other concerns from his mind and turning him into a man with a mission" (21). Zuratas's mission, as far as can be known, is to serve as a representative for the "marginal." To serve as such a representative he must join them. Hence, through his agency as a writer of tales, the narrator creates a textual space in which the "marginalized" Zuratas of his own memory can join the Machiguenga and can walk amongst them as their *hablador.*

It is true that Zuratas never disclosed why he felt such sympathy for the Machiguenga, but the reasons for this can be easily approximated. However, there remains something, again, unutterable. We never hear Zuratas's voice; we never see the Machiguenga—they are removed by a series of narrative dislocations, or even perversions. As Jean O'Bryan Knight claims, *El hablador* consists of three embedded narratives, each serving as a gateway to the next. According to Knight, these coexistent narratives form three "diegetic levels": the first is the level of the narrator; the second is the level of memories "of Mascarita and the *habladores,*" and the third level is "the *hablador's* stories" (77). "We have two different narrators on different diegetic levels," says Knight, "the second of which is the creation of the first" (78). Indeed, the Mascarita/Zuratas figure presented to the reader is the creation of the originary narrator (who, we must remember, is a creation of Vargas Llosa). Yet, while the three narratives are decidedly codependent and exist within one another, there is a kind of dividing line between them. There is a border, and this border can be read as the separation between the chapters of Vargas Llosa's text. This chapter-border is indeed a physical (visible) one, an unmistakable one, which reinforces the impossibility of melting oral into written, or vice-versa. Yet, this obvious border is merely one of a series of "borders," a series of limits. If one transgresses this border or limit, one may fall headlong into an absence or abyss. Perhaps this is the function of the overt physicality of these separations between chapters. They serve as literary guardrails situated on the edge of the void that emerges between these covalent narratives. These narratives depend on their proximity to each other yet they cannot be mixed. Their existence depends on the break between them—the rupture of the text.

Can these ruptures be explained as the incommensurability between the written and spoken word or as the incompatibility between the two narrators (the "real" and the "projected")? These ruptures perhaps also emerge due to the impossibility of reconciliation between pagan, pantheistic, and monotheistic models, or even between dominated and dominant entities. Zuratas is exoticised on both sides of the dyads that

define him, the most indelible being his part-Jewish, part-Creole parentage. Zuratas contains conflicting forces; they form his "self" (as the narrator would have it)—the mark(ing)s of these cultural/religious facets of his identity are insurmountable, irreversible, ever perpetuated by the very continuance of Zuratas as a culture-bearer (whatever conflicted kind of culture-bearer he may be). The turbulence and irreconcilability of these binary pairings almost thwart any potential continuity in *El hablador*, yet somehow Vargas Llosa manages to reconcile his narrative—at least on a functional level. One aspect that remains problematic, however, is the dangling location of language.

There is a negotiation between the Machiguenga language and the Spanish language that Vargas Llosa manages to relate by including a smattering of Machiguenga words in the text. These words enable a certain kind of exoticism to emerge, further distancing the reader from the Machiguenga/Zuratas storyline. Yet the purpose of including this admixture of Machiguenga words and Spanish words is to allow the reader to perceive a certain realism in the orality of the Machiguenga culture. The Machiguenga words make no sense to an uninitiated reader—their syntax is bewildering and their language is peppered with unlocatable identifiers. These words are "recorded" by the narrator and thus gain some semblance of coherence, a coherence that further highlights the clarifying nature of written language. By simplifying language, written text serves as a distilling mechanism. Words can be read and reread on the page, but still they may not be fully understood because they are taken out of the context of the culture from which they come.

Creating a believable Machiguenga language, or lexical pattern, was certainly a narrative hurdle for Vargas Llosa (only some of the words he includes are "real" Machiguenga words). As Castro-Klarén notes,

> Delineating the parameters of the Machiguenga speech act is no doubt the greatest challenge thus far faced by Vargas Llosa's art of representation, for the Machiguenga world that his storyteller engages in cannot be readily encapsulated within the reason or the logic of the absurd known to the West. (212)

Hence, Vargas Llosa allows his narrator to attempt to derive a way to represent the Machiguenga to the reader. For the narrator, the project of written invention was the only way he could hope to understand Zuratas and the Machiguenga. "I must invent," claims the unnamed narrator, "since I have given in to the cursed temptation of writing about him

[Zuratas]" (35). And what he ultimately invents is a hybrid representational object—a Zuratas who is both Western and Machiguenga; a Zuratas who struggles to subvert the forces of Western logocentrism in order to aid in sustaining the integrity of the Machiguenga culture. In this project, the narrator appropriates certain "truths" regarding the Machiguenga and highlights their importance to make the inclusion of Zuratas into their culture more plausible.

The Machiguenga culture and the Machiguenga lore presented in *El hablador* are not accurate representations of the "real" Machiguenga Indians who lived (and still live) in Southeastern Peru. Efraín Kristal makes this point explicit. According to Kristal,

> [*El hablador*] is not, nor does it pretend to be, an accurate portrayal of the Machiguengas... Vargas Llosa transmutes information about the Machiguengas and the Peruvian academic scene in order to establish a counterpoint between two groups of people who are culturally isolated from each other. (158)

Vargas Llosa offers a novel dependent on "fictionalized anthropological material" (159). Vargas Llosa, then, creates a Machiguenga cultural identity to suit his textual designs. There is another gap which emerges here—between the "real" Machiguenga and the representation of them offered in *El hablador*. Kristal explains:

> [Vargas Llosa] develops a stylized language and narrative mode that reads like a translation from a native language whose form and content suggest a non-Western perception of time and space. Vargas Llosa drew from anthropological and linguistic works on the Machiguenga but did not follow them strictly. (164)

Hence, the Machiguenga Indians discussed in the linear, or Western, chapters are an adaptation of an already existing culture. This adaptation is really an inversion in many respects. Kristal states that "Vargas Llosa's Machiguenga are a nomadic people who live in scattered communities in the Amazon jungle. According to the anthropological literature the Machiguenga are a stationary people" (167). To suit his textual designs, Vargas Llosa manipulates anthropological material to create a fictional tribe who, ultimately, only vaguely resemble their actual counterpart. Vargas Llosa allows his narrator to serve as his mouthpiece. The narrator,

then, is responsible for the creation of this fictional Machiguenga tribe. The reader ultimately comes to realize that the catalyst for this "creation" is the narrator's desire to understand the passions of his friend Zuratas. The successive and interdependent narrative strains which coexist in *El hablador* are the result of the urgency with which the narrator hoped to ultimately reconcile himself with all that is "lost" to him (Zuratas, the Machiguenga, oral culture, etc.). The primary force, the creator, of the narrative is, or course, Vargas Llosa. Yet, Vargas Llosa's creation, his narrator, serves to create a fictive representation of someone he "actually" (in the world of the novel) knew. One narrative exists within, and is dependent on, another—and the cycle can continue, as a kind of literary *mise en abîme*. There exists a fracture, or a gulf, between each inlaid narrative scheme (as there is space between each doll in a set of Russian nesting dolls), and, again, it is in this abyss that problems of reconciliation, or creation, emerge.

In the Machiguenga lore of *El hablador*, the act of speaking is a progenitive force. As the Mascarita-*hablador* expresses it, a certain man named Pachakamue could "by speaking, ... give birth to so many animals" (132). In the imagined Machiguenga culture, language is invested with a creative power that allows it be both dangerous and mysterious. It can be misused; it is a tool of power and agency. By appropriating this language, the projected Zuratas develops the ability to acquire a kind of power that he was denied in "civilized" Peruvian culture. He, in effect, is finally allowed to name (to birth) himself. He is the teller of tales, tales that exists beyond the realm of pens and paper and anthropologists and ethnographers, tales that will last as long as there are storytellers to tell them and Machiguenga people to hear them. This is the crisis though, for the Machiguenga (of the novel) are a dying tribe. The insidious forces of Westernized Peruvian civilization and Christianity have already marked the tribe and have altered their behavior. Yet, the tales retain a kind of immortality. The words, unbounded by the shackles of pens and paper, can float suspended above the tribespeople, above the very Peruvian landscape. The narrator, by imagining such a potential for words and orality, allows both language and his lost friend Zuratas to acquire a position of privilege that each was denied within the parameters of "civilized" Peruvian culture. All liminality is erased—Zuratas can function as an accepted member of a tribe. The stories can also retain the usefulness they have lost in other cultural locations. By crafting such spaces for Zuratas and oral storytelling within the text, the narrator allows Zuratas, in effect, to procreate. As in the Machiguenga mythology recorded in alternating chapters, Zuratas is able to "breathe out" a certain

kind of life merely by speaking. The narrator too has "procreated"; he has given birth to a text (the long-delayed Machiguenga story he had for so long intended to write). This is a text which belongs to him and is controlled by him. Thus, in the space of his Machiguenga book, the narrator allows Zuratas to exist in Western culture in a way that he could not as the "real" person the narrator knew in college.

The narrator's rendering of Zuratas and his "fellow" Machiguenga emerges as a kind of memorial, or more to the point, a memory-text. While certain spaces of integrity may emerge for the Zuratas of the narrator's imagination, the narrator recognizes that Zuratas was unable to function, or to be accepted, in the culture into which he was born. The final gap in the text is the space between the real Zuratas of the narrator's memory and the Zuratas who exists in the pages of the narrator's text. *El hablador* is a memory-text whose purpose eludes the narrator himself, and perhaps his inability to entirely tie his narrative together highlights his realization of the futility of such an attempt. Language cannot be fused; written words cannot be balanced with oral ones (even oral words which are created by a practitioner of written language). The desire to create an image of oneself in language (for both the narrator and his rendering of Zuratas), is, as Derrida posits, "a desire to invent a *first language* that would be, rather, a *prior-to-the-first* language destined to translate that memory" (61). The narrator is attempting to translate memories that are not even his own, memories that exists only in their absence and in his ability to create, somehow, a language to suit them. The narrator tries to create a first language that joins both oral and written. This would be a language that *is* (and transcends) both oral and written; a language, that when breathed out, creates both him (the narrator) *and* Zuratas. This would be the language of unity, that, if real, could fill in gaps, spaces, holes (within and beyond text). Yet, such a language is only imaginary, fictive, *not true*. The narrator's experimental, and perhaps struggling, language in *El hablador* demonstrates the attempt to write the memory-text of someone who is not himself — Zuratas.

The Saúl Zuratas of the narrator's memory will forever exist—separated and in separation—with a scar on his face and with a parrot on his shoulder. This Zuratas is marked, characterized, in the narrator's mind and text in much the same way he was characterized by the larger Peruvian culture. The narrator is unable to avoid employing these same devices of social delimitation. For the narrator, this is another problematic burden of reminiscence and memory. While Zuratas suffered in the Peruvian culture into which he was born because of certain marks on his

body, his ability to functionally join another culture with which he is in sympathy allows him to acquire a new body; the narrator ultimately allows him this. The body of the martyr may rise up in a new form, with a new means of agency. The new body that the fictive Zuratas develops is dependent on his relinquishment of his former body on which civilization was "written." The scar on Zuratas's face serves as an emblem of the permanence of inscription, *marking*, in a culture dependent on writing. By envisioning a space of regeneration for Zuratas, the narrator subverts the authority of written language, allowing Saúl (ironically, only in the narrator's own literary contrivance) to no longer suffer limitation due to his disfigurement. Even in a culture that kills its own imperfect young, a full-grown person with physical or psychological failings can subsist. The narrator is certain to point out that for the mature, adult Zuratas, however exceptional he might be, the disfigurement of his face is acceptable to the Machiguenga. To them, he must have been *born* perfect—his scar must have emerged later. He would have been killed at birth if the scar had marred him as a newborn. The narrator allows the hablador Zuratas himself to clarify this apparent discordance. He tells of his own disfigurement and of the status of those who are imperfect. The hablador Zuratas says, "Why didn't they kill me, with this face of mine, I asked them. They, too, laughed. How could [the imperfect] be children of Kientibakori, devils or monsters! Were they born that way? They were pure; they were born perfect. They'd become that way later... Only their outside is that of a monster; inside, they're still pure, no doubt about it" (212). In the system of Machiguenga logic, then, Zuratas can be an accepted member of the tribe because inside he is "still pure." The "birthmark" on his corporeal form reveals nothing of inner contamination; the facial discoloration conveys no message of impurity or imperfection. Such a scar, a *marking*, means nothing in a culture in which writing means nothing. The wine-colored mark appeared at his birth into westernized Peruvian culture and signified a kind of marginal status, an immutable imperfection. As Zuratas births himself anew within the Machiguenga culture, this "*birth*mark" can no longer be read—as a written sign, its meaning evaporates. Jacques Derrida's investigation of language and ownership, from *Monolinguism of the Other*, is helpful here:

> For is the experience of language (or rather, before any discourse, the experience of the mark, the re-mark or the margin) not precisely what makes this *articulation* possible and necessary? Is that not what *gives rise* to this

> articulation between transcendental or ontological universality, and the exemplary or testimonial singularity of *martyred* existence? While evoking apparently abstract notions of the mark and the re-mark here, we are also thinking of scars. Terror is practiced at the expense of wounds inscribed on the body. We speak here of martyrdom and passion in the strict and quasi-etymological sense of these terms. And when we mention the body, we are naming the body of language and writing, as well as what makes them a thing of the body. (27)

If language and writing, then, are things of the *body*, by allowing Zuratas to relinquish writing in favor of orality, the narrator enables Zuratas to relinquish his *body*. These "re-marks," these violent cultural wounds born out of exclusionary principles and a certain lexicon, no longer matter—they are no longer scars on Zuratas's body.

For Derrida, to lose the ownership of language, to be denied the use of one's "native tongue" or "mother tongue," is akin to experiencing the most traumatic form of physical violence. Zuratas's experience can be interpreted thus: since Zuratas was already physically scarred, in taking on the forcible separation of *himself* from his mother tongue he even more graphically pronounces an ownership of himself and a radical dissociation from a mother tongue that never *wanted him* to belong to it. This is one staggering reality that exists within the textual absences in *El hablador*. The narrator realizes that this is a difficult cultural commentary to articulate, thus the inlaid narratives allow the reader to detect that there is a more severe attack on Peruvian "civilization" and written culture at work here. While the narrator earns his livelihood as an intellectual worker and a word-merchant, he recognizes, perhaps through reconstituting the life of his friend Zuratas, that there are certain realms in the culture in which he belongs that are absolutely unforgiving. One who is "unforgiven" (Zuratas) may continue to suffer, languishing on the margins, or he may serve as his own agent-of-change. While there is no concrete evidence that Zuratas does become a Machiguenga storyteller, the narrator envisions a space of inclusion where Zuratas can lose his very name and become merely one man among many (a single *Tasurinchi* among many) *despite* his periodic use of intertextual references from his "former" culture.

The name "Machiguenga" can never approximate the realities of this tribe—any tribe. Vargas Llosa's incommensurable use of "Machiguenga" to refer to a fictive tribe that is not the "real" Machiguenga

illuminates Vargas Llosa's realization of the resistance of tribal complexity to the indelible permanence of print culture. He allows the "actual" Machiguenga an inbuilt resistance to being subsumed in this manner. In some small and significant ways, Zuratas does what Vargas Llosa in effect does not do. Zuratas's need to eschew writing/culture connotes his preoccupation with it. Zuratas keeps the Machiguenga static, imaginatively, operationally, because he dreams of living in a community "free" of the strictures of limiting (delimiting) codes. Yet, he imports new codes because of his unshakable anxiety about slippage. Zuratas, or recall, the narrator's Zuratas, still needs a way to fix the Machiguenga (to affix them to him, to "fix" them through him). As the real Zuratas wrote in an early letter to the narrator, one must not let anger, or effectively, disarray, compromise "the order that reigns the world" (14). In the same letter, written during the narrator and Zuratas's college years, Zuratas invokes the necessity for order, because one surely wouldn't want "life, through your fault, to fall apart and men to return to the original chaos out of which Tasurinchi, the god of good, and Kientibakori, the god of evil, brought us by breathing us out" (15). The narrator's imagined Zuratas depends on order. Through a philosophy of stasis, he aims to provide a bulwark against a fall back into "chaos." This, significantly, is in striking contrast to the seeming "chaos" into which Vargas Llosa allows his text to fall.

When nothing is specific, surely a certain kind of vertigo ensues. Yet, when vagueness is "normal," vertigo is the result of imposed regimentation and order. The Machiguenga culture of the narrator's imagination relies heavily on the flexibility of language. Time is non-specific; personal names are non-existent. In such a culture, confusion may abound, yet these absences engender more interpretive space. This is the paradigm for *El hablador* as a "coherent" text. While the physical novel may be bound by cardboard covers and may be composed of words printed in ink on paper, there is only so much that such regimentation can do. There will always be a space beyond the control of cultural artifice. The narrator of *El hablador* recognizes this—he may not have recognized it at the onset of his project, yet he comes to the resounding conclusion that the impossible *can* become the actual. *El hablador* is Vargas Llosa's melancholy commentary on narrative impossibility. This "narrative impossibility" concerns not only written narratives, or oral narratives, but more pervasive cultural narratives as well. Vargas Llosa's narrator composed his Zuratas/Machiguenga tale in order to exorcise the haunting Mascarita demon from his soul: "[this] is what impelled me to put it into writing in the hope that if I do so, it will cease to haunt me"

(244). The narrator believes that for Zuratas "becoming a storyteller was adding what appeared impossible to what was merely improbable" (244). The Zuratas of the narrator's memory was a man who could not belong, who deliberately tried to remain unfettered by the biases of his fellow ethnologists, anthropologists, and Peruvian citizens. He tried to remain free from the influence of his Jewish ancestry. He attempted to liberate himself from the constricting agenda of Peruvian civilization and academic life. In fleeing from these oppressive "regimes," Zuratas jumps into a void, wraps his arms around a space of emptiness. The "real" Zuratas exists not in the words that the narrator succeeds in "recording," but in the spaces between those words, in the spaces between chapters. There is an abstract interpretive space where written language and oral language no longer stretch towards each other, and a silent, autonomous space remains. This is the silent space of *El hablador*, the space in which words simply *cannot be* translated, where memories cannot be reconstituted, where there is no memory-text. Even during their college years, Zuratas and the narrator were speaking from different cultural registers, and, indeed, the space between them only widened over the years. The narrator recognizes his failure, and the realization of this failure is perhaps what allows him to close his tale. And a final absence resounds—the absence of never being able to *truly* know.

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