

# VOYEURISM, TOTALIZATION, AND THE HYPERREAL IN VARGAS LLOSA'S *IN PRAISE OF THE STEPMOTHER*

*Paula Willoquet-Maricondi*

Raymond Leslie Williams concludes his 1986 study of Mario Vargas Llosa by categorically asserting that "Vargas Llosa is a modern rather than post-modern writer" (173). In 1995, Williams revises this statement to show that Vargas Llosa is fundamentally a modernist writer who has participated in postmodernist practices since the 1970s. M. Keith Booker goes on to show how *In Praise of the Stepmother* is part of Vargas Llosa's ongoing interrogation of boundaries: between artistic traditions, between literature and visual art, between reality and fiction, dream, and imagination.

I will approach Vargas Llosa as a "totalizing modern" whose postmodernist writings constitute a conscious struggle to come to grips with three fundamental drives of modernity as a historical contingency: the drives toward totalization and control, toward an increasingly voyeuristic relationship with the world, and toward the replacement of the world with its representation. This latter modernist drive culminates in postmodernity or, as Jean Baudrillard would put it, in the taking over of the real by the hyperreal. *In Praise of the Stepmother* is a denunciation of what Baudrillard calls the "logic of simulation," where simulation is characterized by the "*precession of the model*" (32); not only is the fact confused with the model, but the model now comes first; in other words, it *generates* the fact.

Vargas Llosa's text reveals that what lies at the end of the project of modernity is the postmodern world--an increasingly inorganic world primarily constituted by vision (Levin) and discourse, a world where representation has claimed victory over the real. He also reveals that what is lost in the process of converting the real into the hyperreal is the living Body, with its pleasures and its pains. What is left is the frozen landscape of representation, the virtual body of the text.

What is at stake in discussions of postmodernism is the status of truth both in the text and in the world. Postmodern novels question the conditions and the means under which truth is established and advocate a plurality of unreconcilable *truths*. Postmodern works do not question so much language's ability to articulate "truths" as its ability to reflect a universal truth. Language articulates, or rather creates, many possible truths, linguistic truths, that is. In the process, language leaves out other, non-linguistic truths such as the truths of the body, and the truths of experiential and organic relationships. Postmodern texts try to recuperate these other truths but in the process only manage to reveal the lies of fiction. This, however, is precisely what redeems

the postmodern text in the eyes of postmodernism's supporters. Linda Hutcheon, for instance, has convincingly argued that the postmodern text *installs* and then subverts the concepts it challenges and is thus metafictionally self-reflective while also addressing political and historical realities.

One device Vargas Llosa uses to break down conventional generic boundaries is the incorporation in his text of reproductions of canonical paintings. These quotations of art works are used to generate short erotic narratives and thus illustrate the ability of representations to give rise to more representations. These visual insertions also involve the reader in an explicitly voyeuristic relationship with the text by stimulating his or her sight and voyeuristic desires.

The novel is organized in fourteen chapters and an epilogue. Seven of the chapters and the epilogue are strictly devoted to the main plot, while the other six chapters, accompanied by reproductions, appear at first to be digressions from the plot. On closer inspection, however, they prove to be tightly, but multivalently, connected to the characters and their story. They invite comparisons between the characters in the novel and those in the short erotic tales and foreshadow, in an ironic way, the fate of the characters. While this technique of fusing within a single narrative line events and characters from different times and places comments on the characters and helps elucidate the events being narrated in the "story," it also, and more importantly, calls attention to the major themes of the novel: voyeurism, triangular desire, and the problematical nature of truth.

Chapter two, for instance, the first digressive chapter, explicitly addresses these three themes, which are, nonetheless, tacitly present in chapter one. Chapter two contains a reproduction of Jacob Jordaens' *Candaules, King of Lydia, showing his wife to Prime Minister Gyges* (1648). In this painting, Lucrecia, the King's wife, is standing in front of the bed, with her back to us, but with her head turned toward us as if in acknowledgment of the presence of the viewer. The inviting, coy smile on her face indicates that she is aware of being watched and is enjoying it. In the background, behind curtains, are two men, one of them, her husband, about to enter the room. The text accompanying the painting narrates the events in the painting: Candaules, King of Lydia, invites his Prime Minister Gyges to peep into his private quarters from behind the draperies of the balcony to witness the King's seduction of his wife Lucrecia. The Prime Minister's authorized voyeurism sets up a triangular relationship between him, his king, and his king's wife, which becomes a source of intense pleasure for all three. Interestingly, this passage foreshadows a subsequent passage in the main narrative where Don

Rigoberto describes the moment of fusion and ecstasy between him and his wife as a "profound trinity of two" (104).

Astonished by the event he witnesses, the Prime Minister compares it to a dream, a fantasy. The King warns him not to speak a word to anyone, for "if this story were to become tavern gossip and marketplace tittle-tattle[,] I might regret having brought you here" (22). But the Prime Minister does not keep his word, and soon the story spreads through town, taking on many versions, one contradicting the other, "each of them more absurd and more untrue than the next" (22).

The correspondences between this tale in chapter two and Vargas Llosa's main narrative are multiple: the King's wife and the stepmother are both called Lucrecia; they are both aroused by the knowledge of being secretly gazed at; they both become objects of desire and exchange between two men; and both their sexual exploits are turned into stories, text, and myths which, in the case of the main narrative, bring about disastrous consequences for husband and wife. The tale of the King of Lydia is linked to the rest of the narrative in yet another way: it is introduced at the end of the previous chapter by Don Rigoberto, Lucrecia's husband, who fantasizes his wife to be the wife of the King of Lydia. Vargas Llosa thus links the characters in his fiction to characters in other stories and blurs the boundaries between the "reality" in his fiction and the representations on which this reality is based. He shows that the fictional world he creates is modeled on other fictional worlds.

The novel narrates the development of an erotic relationship between a teenager Fonchito and his forty-year-old stepmother Doña Lucrecia. Lucrecia, who is worried that her stepson will not fully accept her into the household, is pleasantly surprised to find, however, that the young boy is quite taken by his stepmother when, on her fortieth birthday, he leaves a letter lying on her pillow, an affectionate birthday greeting. This reassuring note leads Lucrecia to express more freely her motherly affection for the child. A few days later, however, the maid Justiniana alerts Lucrecia to the fact that Fonchito has been spying on her while she bathes by climbing up on the roof and peeping through the bathroom's glass ceiling. Infuriated, Lucrecia decides to offer him a double punishment by withholding her care and attention from him and by unashamedly exposing her naked body while bathing. The punishments backfire, however, as Fonchito threatens to commit suicide in response to her coldness, and as she herself becomes aroused as a result of exposing herself to him and of playing "the leading role in this improvised spectacle" (43).

Worried that Fonchito will go through with the threat of suicide, she resumes her affectionate behavior toward the child, who responds by kissing her on the mouth, a move she does not resist; in fact, she returns the kiss. The erotic relationship which develops between stepmother and stepson comes to

an end when Fonchito shows his father the essay he has written to honor his stepmother and in which he recounts their love affair. As a result, Lucrecia is accused of corrupting the child and is chased out of the house. Fonchito then turns to Justiniana as the next object of his desire. She, however, does not fall prey to his seduction but reveals him for the little "devil" that he is, accusing him of having planned out the whole thing in order to get his stepmother thrown out of the house.

Fonchito's defense is to claim that all he did was "write that composition, telling about what we did. The truth, that is" (146). By making a text out of his relationship with Lucrecia, Fonchito not only destroys the woman, but he also destroys both his father's relationship with her and his own. Fonchito is, foremost, interested in and loyal to textual relationships--both linguistic and visual--which he uses to control human relationships. The novel opens with the birthday letter he leaves on Lucrecia's bed; when we first meet him, he is in bed reading a book by Alexandre Dumas; his suicide threat comes in the form of a letter; it is the composition he writes which destroys the stepmother, and, at the end of the novel, as he is being unmasked by Justiniana, he picks up a book from the night table and settles down to read.

While spying on her from his elevated viewing position through the glass window on the ceiling Fonchito already experiences Lucrecia as a representation, an abstraction: her status as an object of his gaze is emphasized by her nudity, by the distance separating stepmother and stepson, and by the frame of the glass pane. Fonchito even compares the experience of watching her to that of watching a movie! (39).

In chapter eleven, in the aftermath of his sexual fusion with Lucrecia, Fonchito again compares her to another representation, an abstract painting by Fernando de Szyszlo, entitled *Road to Mendieta 10* (1977) which hangs in the family room, and which is reproduced in the next chapter. He calls it "her secret portrait" (111), and a "dirty picture" (107). Lucrecia seems to accept this objectification as she had the previous one in the bath. That same night, while in bed with her husband, she invites him to guess her "new identity" and to fantasize about her as the painting: "That's who I am," she explains, "and I don't know why you haven't realized it before" (116). This exchange is marked in the text by another reference to cinema: "there was an astonished pause, like a freeze frame in a film" (115).

Chapter twelve, containing the Szyszlo painting, elucidates for us an interpretation of the painting as the aftermath of copulation. The chapter opens with an invitation to gaze and the language used throughout evokes voyeurism and representation: the setting is a "stage set"; the female narrator describes herself as a "victim," an "inspiration," and an "actress"; the addressee is a male whose "attentive libertine gaze" looks on as though "autopsying" the object of

the gaze. The painting is said to contain its own "exhibitionistic spectators" who paradoxically become the "eyes" which permit the narrator and her partner to contemplate themselves.

That textuality and sexuality are repeatedly connected in this novel is clear from the fact that reading is always associated with bedtime, and that the texts Fonchito produces are designed to seduce or are erotic accounts of a seduction. In this respect, Fonchito resembles his father who habitually consults his collection of erotic paintings and texts for sexual stimulation. Don Rigoberto's erotic fantasies are inspired by a well established canon of erotic art much the way Vargas Llosa's novel--itself an erotic fantasy--is inspired by visual reproductions, most of them of female nudes.

Vargas Llosa thus seems to be commenting both on the fact that the visual arts have historically exerted a great deal of influence on literary texts (Mathieu 43) and on the fact that art in general has increasingly become the source of reality. Vargas Llosa's novel could thus be taken as a postmodernist self-implicating critique of postmodernism's own complicity with, and extension of, the modernist impulse to represent reality truthfully and exhaustively which culminates in the subordination of reality to representation in a world which is more and more the object of our own making.

Father and son also share an ambivalent, even hostile, attitude toward the body. We are told that Don Rigoberto's favorite leisure activity, next to erotic paintings, is the pursuit of bodily cleanliness. In fact, so obsessed is Don Rigoberto with bodily cleanliness that several chapters are devoted to his rightly "slow paced and complicated" ablutions (3). He is repulsed by the spontaneous processes of his body and methodically subjects every part of it to rigorous cleaning, "a punctilious ritual that he had been perfecting through the years" (53). He compares himself to an "artist" and his body to a "masterpiece." The hairs on his nose, for instance are "anti-aesthetic" and need to be "decapitated," a task that calls for the expertise of "an Oriental miniaturist" (97).

Don Rigoberto's hostility toward his body and Fonchito's "desacralization" of Lucrecia's body can be taken to reflect modernity's alienation from and demonization of the natural world. Modernity prefers abstractions over existential relationships because they are more easily controllable and manipulable, and the modern subject sees himself as a master of the symbolic, a semiotic virtuoso, or, as Larry Riggs has it, a "practitioner of desacralization" (9). At the end of the novel, only the memory of Lucrecia remains, in the form of the painting reproduced in the text; of Fonchito's essay; and of Vargas Llosa's novel, entitled, like Fonchito's essay, *In Praise of the Stepmother*. To praise through representation, this novel seems to suggest, is an act of erasure and of substitution. Justiniana's resistance to Fonchito's advances can be seen

as a healthy skepticism toward the drives of modernity discussed here. *In Praise of the Stepmother* seems to be an invitation to the reader to share in this skepticism and not to take discourse at its word.

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