

Vargas Llosa's *La Ciudad y los perros* and the European Novel of Adolescence

John Neubauer
University of Amsterdam

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John Neubauer,

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Abstract: In his paper, "Vargas Llosa's *La Ciudad y los perros* and the European Novel of Adolescence," John Neubauer investigates Mario Vargas Llosa's 1962 novel about cadets in a military school located just outside of Lima, Peru. The life of a gang (the dogs) in the city and on the premises is described from constantly changing perspectives. Neubauer's article looks at Vargas Llosa's work in terms of features one finds in narratives about adolescents in European literatures around 1900 and where these texts can be read with three main foci found in them. Thematically, the texts focus on the city and urbanity and on the problematics of the concept and workings of peer groups while stylistically the texts show their authors' experimentation with new narrative forms.

John NEUBAUER

Vargas Llosa's *La Ciudad y los perros* and the European Novel of Adolescence

Literary history is a child of Romanticism, born in the early years of the nineteenth century, when Friedrich Schlegel, August Wilhelm Schlegel, and S.T. Coleridge offered public lectures on the history of European literatures. However, as the study of modern literatures became institutionalized at universities in the course of the nineteenth century, *national* literary histories became the dominant mode of literary scholarship. In the twentieth century, national literary histories have come under attack, both for their chauvinistic potential and for their unreflected theoretical presuppositions. With the emergence of New Historicism and other recent trends that advocate a return to history, methodological questions have moved into the forefront of the discussion, and attempts have been made to write both new kinds of national literary histories and more effective kinds of comparative ones.

My following contribution to this ongoing discussion is an attempt to treat a Peruvian novel of the 1960s in light of an earlier European tradition. It is not my intention, however, to show the "influence" of the latter on the former, nor will I try to package (or camouflage) my undertaking by calling that venerable method "intertextual." Although I am treating an intercontinental subject, I shall want to ask questions that pertain to the specifically Latin-American context of Vargas Llosa's novel. Ultimately, I hope to contribute therefore to the now emerging regional-transnational approach to literary history that is exemplified in a new series on literary cultures at Oxford University Press (<<http://www.chass.utoronto.ca/lithist>>; Valdés and Hutcheon). In this series, volumes are now under preparation by Mario Valdés and his team on Latin-America (Hutcheon, Kadir, Valdés), and by Marcel Cornis-Pope and myself on East Central Europe (Neubauer 1999).

In a discussion about his early novel, *La ciudad y los perros*, Mario Vargas Llosa once remarked that the Latin American novel has represented realities that are alien to the urban readers of Latin America ("Los lectores latinoamericanos han sido, y son hoy en día, lectores de ciudades, y la novela latinoamericana es una novela que ha registrado, ha representado verbalmente realidades que a esos lectores les resultaban inéditas, ignoradas"; *Antología mínima* 125). *La ciudad y los perros* breaks self-consciously with the tradition of using natural and mythical setting in Latin-American novels by calling attention to the city, both in its title and, in the Seix Barral edition, by means of a map of Lima that prefaces the text. Although *La ciudad* is, of course, not the first Latin-American novel with an urban setting, it does represent a new voice that starkly contrasts with its more famous but in a certain sense more traditional rival, García Márquez' *Cien años de soledad*, published just a few years later. The mythic and rural setting of the latter is portrayed with "magic realism," a term whose forgotten origins may be traced back to Novalis and German romanticism; the style of Vargas Llosa's urban novel is more akin to naturalism and modernism.

There are additional reasons as well for linking *La ciudad* to the European literature around 1900 rather than to that of around 1800. As I have shown in my book on *The Fin-de-Siècle Culture of Adolescence*, the turn of the nineteenth century produced a burst of literary and artistic works about adolescence that are tightly interwoven with the discourse on adolescence in psychoanalysis, psychology, pedagogy, criminology, and the youth movements. These discourses come about because of the tremendous growth that the institutions of secondary education underwent in the course of the nineteenth century. They conceptualize, as well as problematize, this age group and its most important institutional contexts. If the romantic cult of the child a century earlier was part of a nostalgic yearning for mythologized nature, the new discourses on adolescence concerned themselves with issues of identity and socialization within industrialized and urban settings. If the cult of the child expressed a yearning for some more pristine modes of existence, discourses on adolescence marked a self-questioning and diffusion of identity that individuals and the whole of Western culture experienced at the eve of the great war. In that war individual identities regrettably merged into chauvinistic group identities. The narrative thematization of these problems around 1900 may be characterized in terms of three features, all of which reappear in Vargas Llosa's *La ciudad*: 1) Focus on the city; 2) Characterization of the peer group; and 3) Experimentation with new narrative forms.

Let us consider the setting first. Novels of adolescence have two basic kinds of setting, the school and the city. Whenever the school was in the countryside, as was the case with the English public schools, the novels depicted isolated adolescent communities, for which the city appeared only on the horizon, as the locus of threat and seduction. Such is the case with Kipling's *Stalky & Co.*, Larbaud's *Fermina Márquez*, Alain-Fournier's *Le Grand Meaulnes*, and Musil's *Törless*. If, however, the school was in the city (as was more often the case), the treatment of adolescence involved not only urban settings, but became a portrait of the city as well. This is what happens in Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Thomas Mann's *Tonio Kröger*, Gide's *Les Fauxmonnayeurs*, and Cocteau's *Les enfants terribles*. Contrary to what one may expect, the primary tension in both settings is not generational but within the peer group itself. Of course, oedipal conflicts do play an important role in adolescent identity crises, and they do get some attention in those urban novels in which adolescents are only partially removed from their home environment. But oedipal conflicts play only a secondary role even in these novels, for the narratives tend to focus on the friendships and animosities between adolescents.

The fictional treatment of identity crisis necessitated the development of certain narrative techniques that are typical of modernist fiction in general. Perspectivism, the widely used modernist technique of portraying characters from different focalizations or points-of-view, became the hallmark of novels about adolescents. This could be achieved in a variety of narrative modes. In some cases, as in Joyce's *A Portrait*, Mann's *Tonio Kröger*, and Musil's *Törless*, the narrator seems, figuratively, an older version of the protagonist. In other cases, a special innovative technique, which I call the "peer-group narrator," was introduced. Such narrators are to be found in Larbaud's *Fermina Márquez*, Alain-Fournier's *Le Grand Meaulnes*, Hesse's *Demian*, and Lacretelle's *Silbermann*. Each of these stories employ an internal, "first-person" narrator, who portrays the title figure and his friendship with him, similar to the more general "witness narrator" employed in Conrad's Marlowe novels and Scott Fitzgerald's *Great Gatsby*. But "peer-group" narrators have a more specific function as well, for they indicate that the group is the primary context of adolescent identity crises.

It is not my intention to trace the influence of these novels on Vargas Llosa's *La ciudad y los perros*. In fact, I do not know to what extent Vargas Llosa was aware of the European novels about adolescents when he wrote his own, Latin-American version. My main interest is to highlight some of his concerns and techniques by setting them against the tradition I so briefly sketched. If we follow the three dimensions outlined in my discussion of the European tradition, we may first note that Vargas Llosa's choice of setting is autobiographically determined. He attended the *collegio militar* "Leoncide Prado," and the *collegio* thanked him later for his fictionalization of it by burning La Ciudad on a bonfire. This, and the two painful years he spent at the *collegio*, embittered Vargas Llosa in his view of the school, but he was, so to speak, lucky with the location of Leoncide Prado, for it offered him both urban and rural experience. The *collegio* is located outside Lima, towards the port and the airport in Callao. The result of this topographical accident is that, as indicated in the title, *La ciudad y los perros* has a double setting and focus: the military academy with its "dogs," -- i.e., the first-year cadets -- and nearby Lima, where the cadets go whenever they are given a furlough. The tension between the military setting and the city, which is the locus of seduction as well as of the home environment, is a major factor in the adolescent crises depicted. But the double setting has another, even more important role, one that is a hallmark of this novel of adolescence: the city is not only a locus for adolescence, it also functions as the place of childhood, which Vargas Llosa depicts at great length, not so much in its own right but as the antecedent of adolescence. City and academy are thus two contrastive locales, and they also represent the two temporal levels between which the novel weaves its way back and forth in such a manner that by the novel's end the story of childhood will have "caught up" with the story of adolescence.

Turning to the adolescent conflicts, we can identify another function of the double setting. The city is the locus of the oedipal conflicts, and the heterosexual affairs. In contrast, the military school is the sphere of male bonding, the environment in which survival necessitates joining with others. The English title of the book, *Time of the Hero*, refers to the perverted code of honor that

develops in male gangs and military formations. These aspects of setting and human interaction prepare us for a discussion of the novel's most interesting aspect, its narrative mode. The peer-group narrators of the mentioned European novels foreground the peer-group relations, but they center on two individuals (narrator and protagonist), who usually get into conflict with the rest. Only Larbaud attempts a broader group portrayal by breaking the convention of the internal narrator and allowing him insight into the thoughts and feelings of (at least a few of) his fellows.

Vargas Llosa takes a more radical step by abandoning the convention of a single narrator. His story is told from the point of view of several, both internal and external, first person and third-person, narrators. Vargas Llosa regards the world of psychological novels as one-dimensional; to avoid this he strove in *La ciudad* for "a reality of distinct levels" ("una realidad a distintos niveles," *Antología mínima* 141). The book begins with a conventional external narrator. But the continuation of these first segments are saturated with additional narrative lines, the most important ones consisting of the interior monologues of the black boy Boa and the story of a poor childhood in Lima. Only far into the novel will it become evident that the tender and poor child in Lima is identical with Jaguar, the leader of the "dogs" in the *collegio*. His counterpart is Alberto, "the poet," whose very different childhood in the rich Miraflores section of Lima is also told in bits and pieces.

Short of giving a detailed account of the various interlaced stories here that are set partly in the *collegio*, partly in Lima, cutting through geographical as well as social boundaries, I merely want to suggest that Vargas Llosa's brilliantly handled perspectivist portrayal of individuals and gang dynamics amounts to a culmination of the novelistic experimentation that started with the peer-group narrators shortly before the outbreak of World War I. The formal and thematic qualities of *La ciudad* are so deeply rooted in its specific genre and language that they cannot be reproduced in other media. Francisco J. Lombardi, the director of the excellent 1985 film of the novel, therefore wisely decided not to translate them unto the screen. He surrendered the novel's narrative variety and all but eliminated the scenes that take place in the city. In other words, of the three dimensions I have discussed, he dropped two (attention to the city and experimentation with narrative forms), and fully concentrated on the third, the peer-group interaction and the mystery murder. The film is successful because it gives an excellent psychological characterization of the persons involved, but it doesn't, and cannot, have the variety I have tried to describe.

I have linked *La ciudad* to a novelistic form that emerged around 1900 and flourished in the first quarter of this century. Although it never died out completely, it did decline in the 1930s and 1940s. J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* (1953) may be considered to mark the genre's reentry, but this novel focuses more sharply on the protagonist and therefore uses a more appropriate first-person narrative mode. Much closer to Vargas Llosa's *La ciudad* is Günter Grass's *Cat and Mouse*, which appeared just a year later. Although Grass' narrative zest and imagination often veers off into the fantastic and may, therefore, be better compared to that of García Márquez, the novelistic technique of *Cat and Mouse* is clearly in the tradition of the peer-group narrator and closer therefore to Vargas Llosa's work. In the portrayal of the setting and the adolescent group dynamics the two works strongly resemble each other. *Cat and Mouse* is the middle part of Grass's "Danzig Trilogy," an ironic and ambivalent retrospective of the city of his childhood and adolescence. Although there is no military academy in *Cat and Mouse*, Grass's high-school adolescents are from the beginning exposed to the military. In the first scenes they play on a half-sunken submarine, later they are forced to leave the city and enter Hitler's disintegrating army. Grass's view of the military is every bit as ironic as Vargas Llosa's, and there can be no doubt that the Nazis would have burned his book had they lived to see it.

I hope to have exemplified with this all too brief study of *La Ciudad y los perros* a comparative approach to non-European literature that neither engages in source hunting nor gives priority to what is chronologically older. Vargas Llosa's novel ought to be understood within the Latin American context, its urban and adolescent problems. Of course, Vargas Llosa must have known something of the European narrative works I mentioned. But the main point of my reference to these works was not the establishment of "intercontinental links." Rather, I hope to have shown how writers may react to comparable and yet different socio-cultural situations, how regional cultural and artistic processes may be compared meaningfully with each other.

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Author's profile: John Neubauer teaches comparative literature at the University of Amsterdam. His publications include *Symbolismus und symbolische Logik* (1978), *The Emancipation of Music from Language* (1986), *The Fin-de-siècle Culture of Adolescence* (1992) and many contributions to the Münchner Ausgabe of Goethe's works. He is editor of the comparatist journal *arcadia: Zeitschrift für Vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft* and is currently editing, with Marcel Cornis-Pope, a history of literary cultures in East Central Europe, to be published by Oxford University Press (see <<http://www.chass.utoronto.ca/lithist>>). E-mail: <j.neubauer@hum.uva.nl>.