

Latin American literary project in favor of democracy: the cases of Mario Benedetti, Ricardo Piglia and Mario Vargas Llosa.


Proyecto literario latinoamericano a favor de la democracia: los casos de Mario Benedetti, Ricardo Piglia y Mario Vargas Llosa.

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Abstract:

The purpose of this article is to demonstrate that there was an interest on the part of Latin American writers in portraying the various human rights abuses committed by dictatorial governments. In the case of Uruguay, I will use the short story "La vecina orilla" by Mario Benedetti. From Argentina, I will use the novel *Prisión perpetua* by Ricardo Piglia. And for Peru, I will use *The City and the Dogs* by Mario Vargas Llosa. These three references will be indispensable to corroborate from history and literature the repercussions that have existed in society due to the mismanagement of the hegemonic and governmental classes. In order to reach the projected conclusion, customary analysis of fragments of the mentioned works will be carried out, confronted with historical material and related to concomitant discourses of that time. Thus, the result will be the explicit worldview of each author worked on.

Key words: Latin American literature. Political commitment. Textual analysis. Democracy.

Resumen:

Este artículo tiene como propósito demostrar que hubo un interés por parte de los escritores latinoamericanos en retratar los distintos abusos hacia los derechos humanos desde los gobiernos dictatoriales. Para el caso de Uruguay, recurriré al cuento "La vecina orilla" del Mario Benedetti. De Argentina, cotejaré la novela *Prisión perpetua* de Ricardo Piglia. Y, para Perú, utilizaré *La ciudad y los perros* de Mario Vargas Llosa. Estos tres referentes serán indispensables para que se puedan corroborar desde la historia y la literatura las repercusiones que han existido en la sociedad por el mal manejo de las clases hegemónicas y gubernamentales. Para llegar a la conclusión proyectada, se

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realizarán análisis consuetudinarios de fragmentos de las obras mencionadas, se confrontarán con material histórico y se relacionarán con discursos concomitantes de esa época. De esa manera, se tendrá como resultado la cosmovisión explícita de cada autor trabajado.

Palabras clave: Literatura latinoamericana. Compromiso político. Análisis textual. Democracia.

There is a constant in Latin American literary production that narrates the political situation in the mid-twentieth century. This is characterized by capturing through the novel or story situations that represent the way of life of many citizens prevented from expressing themselves freely; moreover, symptoms of abuse and censorship are shown that undermine the fulfillment of preserving their human rights. Literature has captured stories that bear witness to this. In addition, it is possible to count on the ideology inferred from the author himself, which coincides in this stubbornness to criticize any abuse coming from the hegemonic class.

In order to delve deeper into this topic, I have resorted to three specific cases from Latin America. I will use three authors of different nationalities to check how the treatment has been during that period. In this sense, this work has been divided into three parts. The first one will deal with the text "La vecina orilla" by the Uruguayan writer Mario Benedetti. For this, it will be seen how the repression of a dictatorial government harms citizens, which has been fictionalized and captured in the literary discourse. The second part will deal with the novel by Argentine writer Ricardo Piglia, *Prisión perpetua* (2007). In this, an approach to memory will be made, which will be appreciated from a collective and individual point of view. Reference will be made to some passages of this novel and it will be compared with the social and political impact generated in that context. Finally, the literary work of Mario Vargas Llosa, *The City and the Dogs*, will be taken as a reference. The purpose is to see how exegesis carries out studies that try to capture those referents criticized by the Peruvian author. To this end, a recount of the study by Carlos Aguirre (2015) will be made and the notion of phallocentrism will be articulated, which is what Victor Quiroz introduces so that the reader becomes aware of what progress and advancement mean for the common citizens.

Having finished explaining the structure of this work, I remind you that the purpose of this article is to prove that there was a tendency from Literature to criticize the contemporary system through which the writers were going through. Also, an evidence to give them a greater verisimilitude to their stories is that

most of the events that are reflected in their novels or their stories are based on or reproduced from a real context of the history of the mid-twentieth century.

The Impediment of Freedom in Mario Benedetti's "La vecina orilla" (The Neighbor's Edge)

The risk of freedom of expression is represented in this story. Some tendencies are detected that have been developed in the socio-political and historical context of Uruguay between the seventies and eighties of the twentieth century. These factors are the impediment of speech by political convicts, the abuse of military forces and citizen insecurity.

The first of these is related to the non-authorization of the sentenced person for political reasons, the fact of not speaking. What in postcolonial theories of literature is known as the "voice of the other"; that is, the subject who is prevented from expressing his or her voice. This is anyone who is in a state of exclusion with respect to the hegemonic class of a society. When faced with this impediment, their freedom of expression is subjected to censorship or lethargy through terror, as happened historically during the civil-military dictatorship in Uruguay (1973-1985), which led to the prohibition of political parties, the outlawing of unions and the press media, the persecution, imprisonment and murder of opponents of the regime.

With all this, it is possible to assume that there is a pretension to universalize the metaphor developed by Eduardo Galeano (2006) when he states that man is a cow that moos. By assuming this representation, an interpretation is produced that alludes to the animalization of the human being; and, therefore, to the destruction of his dignity. That harmful complexion would be notorious in many of the Uruguayan writer's stories, as can be seen in the following fragment from "La vecina orilla": "The younger ones did not speak, they did not confess anything, nor did they say the names and data that the others wanted, but when the machine was applied to them they screamed like condemned men" (Benedetti, 1994, p. 45). In this quote, it is visible how citizens are unable to express themselves; moreover, they will suffer some kind of repression if they do so. They are prevented from speaking out and, above all, from protesting.

Another important element that is evident in Mario Benedetti's "La vecina orilla" is the abuse by the military forces of those who are linked as opponents of the government. If mention is made of the different historical discourses that record the dictatorship in Uruguay during that period, one will find

numerous mentions of the disappeared, tortured, shot and women raped by the military troops. A significant example in this literary work is the rape suffered by Dionisio's partner, Vicky, who was detained for having been a member of a political party against the dictatorship. In comparison with the historical discourse, it is possible to compare the psychological, psychiatric or death repercussions that the victims' relatives went through, such as the false hopes of a recovery, a suitable return of the disappeared or an imaginary substitution of that life of torture for another in which none of it happened. In a text by Galeano (2006), reference is made to this unhealthy modality, in which the torturer not only fulfills his criminal objective, but also enjoys it, as can be seen below:

A pregnant prisoner is given the choice between rape and the electric prod. She chooses the cattle prod, but after an hour she can no longer stand the pain. Then she is raped by everyone. While they rape her, they sing the Wedding March (Galeano, 2006, p. 7).

In this quote, one can appreciate the lack of humanity for those people who abused power and had no remorse for the mental state of each citizen. However, in Mario Benedetti's text (1994), it is specified that this problem will not be the only one through which the victims go through, but also the insecurity of the citizens. This is experienced and represented by the narrator-character Eduardo, who at unexpected moments must go to some locality to avoid physical contact with crime. To this, we can add Eduardo's perception of the city. He hates it because of the dangerous environment that develops as a result of the frequent terrorist acts. In the following fragment, we can observe how the narrator-character Eduardo delivers a monologue that is distinguished by its predictive and defeating character:

I have already started my new duties, so I wrote to the old lady that they can rest assured: I will not die of hunger. Although, yes, I do not rule out death when crossing Libertador or if a stray bullet catches me in any of the shootouts that enliven this great city (Benedetti, 1994, p. 58).

This fragment corroborates the inclusion of a latent danger in society, which is accepted by Eduardo himself. Living or getting out of this context unscathed will be an illusion. The constant worry and the impossibility of thinking of an unpleasant end will be the themes that will be introduced in the way of thinking of the citizens.

Having exposed the three proposals around Benedetti, it is also possible to think of a solution. This would be characterized by the hope that emerges from society itself, which is represented by the direct victims of these catastrophes, as it happens with the characters of Dionisio and Vicky, who suffer psychological violence, abuse from the authorities and a trauma that will harm them for the rest of their lives, such as the fact of conceiving a child that is the product of the rape of military entities, as well as preserving the state of mental health of the woman herself. The following quote shows that solution that they will have to assume anyway:

We meet in a café in front of Plaza Italia. Dionisio shows me the letter and I give him even more encouragement: "You'll see how everything works out. You bring it here and they'll start to live." "Do you believe?" Of course I believe. You have to believe, there is no other choice (Benedetti, 1994, p. 89).

With this fragment, one can appreciate the author's worldview. It will be of greater relevance and transcendence to be able to continue with life. Remembering the painful past or being in an inactive state will not be propitious for these characters. They will have to stimulate and encourage themselves to continue with their lives. At least, that is what the narrator implies, since he will then continue with his writing. Due to his function within the text, we come to know that the character Eduardo will live in hiding in order to get by with a job as an editor. This job will allow him to live well, without luxuries or major salaried pretensions, but with tranquility and honesty.

Historically, the religious will intervene in a just and compensatory way for the believers and the victims of these terrorist atrocities of the military or the members of the Condor Plan. And this can be compared with the emergence of the Latin American Episcopate. The latter will propose that the globalization of justice will be positive in order to live progressively with dignity and integrity.

A Memoir of Social and Political Violence in *Perpetual Imprisonment* by Ricardo Piglia

This novel develops descriptive arguments about stages of social and political violence in the writer's native country, Argentina. For example, this will be appreciated at the beginning when it is contextualized about the Perón's government in 1955. This feature makes reference to the importance of searching for the truth

in order to find the universal reason for which it is investigated from memory or oral tradition (Franco, 2003). All this is verified with the constant historical and political links that adhere fiction to reality. In this regard, Kyeong Eun Park (2009) has detected the possible methods of analysis in terms of *Life Imprisonment*, such as intratextuality, intertextuality, transtextuality and hypertextuality, which are supported by history. Verbigracia, in Piglia's novel (2007), there are customary references to elements that are auscultatory for the reader, according to the culture or cultural background he possesses, such as the allusion to American writers, such as William Faulkner, Henry James, Hortense Calisher and Robert Lowell. Likewise, it is also corroborated with that narrative poetics, which is characterized by the mentions of Steve Ratliff as a model of oral storyteller. Likewise, the incorporation of different geographical places, such as Argentina, Mar del Plata, Buenos Aires, New York, the Mississippi, Missouri, among other elements, such as the reference to Vladimir Nabokov, a Frankie Lane song, the FBI, etc., is also appreciated.

In general, it is necessary to clarify that the memory that is articulated in the narrative will focus on and prioritize the explanations and justifications of the guerrillas of the sixties and seventies, which will be too traumatizing. In this case, we can recall Juan Gelman's "Carta abierta a mi nieta o nieto" (1996). There he recounts the death of his son and daughter-in-law during the military dictatorship, as well as those damaging events that affected his grandson, such as the fact that he was born in a concentration camp and disappeared for more than two decades. All this background allows the reader to erect a notion of the contemporary historical narrative. To this end, it is also important to highlight the writer's purpose in how he tells that story. For example, a constant in the narrator-character is to reveal that concern through different passages, as can be seen below:

A storyteller, says the Bird, must be faithful to the state of a subject. He seeks to surprise in a mirror the reflections of a scene happening elsewhere. Storytelling is linked to the divinatory arts, says the Pájaro. To narrate is to transmit to language the passion of what is to come (Piglia, 2007, p. 66).

In this fragment, one can appreciate the need to write about what will happen; that is to say, the expression of the characters will be at the same time a projection of what should be fulfilled in time. This peculiarity is also similar to what Piglia seems to be interested in: fictionalizing reality. In other words, the narrator knows the story very well, but he will tell it in such a way that he will take advantage of it to place

the impressions he will have. In view of this, the participation and the important role that memory plays in the discourse are notorious, since it not only reconstructs the historical past, but also the identity of each subject. This is how Jean Franco (2003) understands it. It is for this reason that this thinker has the idea of a social and collective memory during that stage, which will be represented in the narrative of Ricardo Piglia (2007). In the same way, it is also possible to note that the writer's discourse is based on an opposite topic, where there is a greater presence of the subjective and the individual. This interest is no longer collective. It is another type of memory. In fact, this modality turns out to be deeper than the one registered in the official discourse. This can be evidenced in the narrator-character's monologue when he refers to his diary:

Sometimes, when I reread it, I find it hard to recognize what I have lived through. There are episodes narrated there that I have completely forgotten. They exist in the Diary but not in my memories. And at the same time, certain events that remain in my memory with the clarity of a photograph are absent as if I had never lived them (Piglia, 2007, p. 17).

In this fragment, the narrator-character refers to emotions; that is, to what is indescribable by words. And that, at the same time, generates a mistake when trying to find in the historical discourse the totality of what was lived in a certain period. In this sense, making reference to a collective memory implies that it does not necessarily coincide with what is recorded in official discourses, since it may have captured the essential and the majority, but it may also obviate details and even be manipulated for surreptitious purposes. In this way, it is possible to understand why some politicians assume this position when they have to refer to the histories of their countries. For this reason, it is feasible to detect a policy of amnesia (Franco, 2003). This idea is reinforced by what Jean Franco points out at the beginning of his speech, when he worries about the possibility of assuming the history of Latin American countries (Argentina, Chile, Guatemala, El Salvador, etc.) with the equidistant idea of representing the past and the present in two different universes, that is to say, the historical memory against the proposal of modernization and urban development. The latter would be supported by the media, who support the official versions of history (Franco, 2003).

By applying a policy of amnesia, the claim made by Luis Jiménez (2011) in his article is being denied. He insists on the importance of preserving human rights. To this end, he gives as an example the

organization known as International Law. Likewise, Alelí Jait (2009) in "Poesía y dictadura. Analysis of the poem 'Cadáveres' by Néstor Perlongher", who emphasizes the importance of the decoding of silence, since this is a priority in the macabre findings of the dead and kidnapped. From them, multiple reasons become evident, such as their struggles when they feel abused or attacked by the State and the presence of revolutionary icons in constant conflict and threat.

Criticism of Machismo and the Military Dictatorship in Mario Vargas Llosa

Carlos Aguirre's text (2015) is a similar work to that done by Sergio Vilela in *El cadete Vargas Llosa. La historia oculta tras La ciudad y los perros* (2003), where one can appreciate the focus on the recurrent spaces of this first novel by Vargas Llosa: the Leoncio Prado Military School and essential places in Lima. Likewise, anthropology is not obviated according to the forms of coexistence, such as its social context, the military way of life and the family environment.

In the case of Carlos Aguirre's book (2015), there is a preponderance in presenting the novel under a specific context: the background of the publication of the novel, together with the impact generated in the readers. All this I will develop according to the structure presented in the book. Likewise, it is necessary to remember that this explanation is made in order to go deeper into the cosmovision that Mario Vargas Llosa presents in *The City and the Dogs* and in his novels in general.

In the introduction of Aguirre's book (2015), there is an account and an assessment of what the Latin American *boom* in literature meant for the author. For this, he argued the transcendence of the institution of Casa de las Américas, founded in 1959, the different awards that were made for literary works and the dissemination of multiple publishing houses that promoted them. Most of these published texts had in common their criticism of the political system. That is why many of these writers adopted a leftist ideology, to judge all types of dictatorial government. In the case of Peru, reference would be made to the period of General Odría's mandate, which is notorious in Mario Vargas Llosa's *Conversation in the Cathedral*.

In Chapter 1 (Aguirre, 2015), the background of *La ciudad y los perros* is appreciated, together with the friendships that the Peruvian writer had. From this, it can be inferred that there is a purpose of wanting

to justify the writer's approach to politics, which is reflected in the novel. That worldview is also reciprocal in Vargas Llosa's own activities. For example, there are references to Che Guevara or Fidel Castro.

Chapter 2 (Aguirre, 2015) begins with the imprecision that Vargas Llosa's first novel went through in relation to its title. To this end, it is narrated that at first it was thought to be called *Los impostores*; then, *Colegio Militar*; and, later, *Las cuadras*. In addition, we learn about the importance of the Spanish poet Carlos Barral, who created the Biblioteca Breve Prize (which would be awarded to Vargas Llosa in 1962 for the aforementioned text), along with various anecdotes that would make the Peruvian writer the absolute winner.

In chapter 3 (Aguirre, 2015), the theme of the censorship that *La ciudad y los perros* had in Spain is developed. This was due to the predominance of Franco's government in that country, which prevented the publication of topics such as violence, homosexuality, prostitution, along with the criticism of values and religion. Even so, it is said that the readers were not satisfied, as Carlos Barral refers when he sent a report to Vargas Llosa in 1963 to try to "soften" some terms, a remark that was made in 17 pages only, also suggested by Robles Piquer.

Chapter 4 (Aguirre, 2015), reveals the importance given to Mario Vargas Llosa in Spain for the dissemination of his texts in the printing presses, as it happened with his works such as *La ciudad y los perros* and *Los jefes*. In this section of the book, images of the covers of the first edition of the book are shown, along with some newspaper advertisements, in which interest in the author was promoted.

In Chapter 5 (Aguirre, 2015), we learn how and which publishers began to publish *The City and the Dogs*, such as Populibros. It also narrates how it was edited in English, whose final title was *The Time of the Hero* (and not *The City and the Dogs*). In addition, the reaction of the Leoncio Prado Military School itself upon reading the novel is recounted. So far, a significant burning of the books has been associated with a sign of protest against the bad image that the author portrayed of him in his novel. Later on, mention will be made of some governments (such as that of Alan García) that allowed the dissemination of the author's complete narrative in convenient publishing houses.

In the conclusion (Aguirre, 2015), there is an explanation about the burning of books of *La ciudad y los perros*, mentioned in the previous chapter. And in the documentary annex (Aguirre, 2015), the letters sent by the Peruvian writer are shown, as well as from people close to him, to refer to his novel, as is the

case of José María Valverde. The purpose of these exchanges is to appreciate the acceptance of the publication of the work and its literary effectiveness.

Finally, Carlos Aguirre (2015) presents a bibliography on the issues of censorship (a topic analyzed in the book), of the critical authors who have analyzed Vargas Llosa's novels and of the contemporary authors who manifested his different literary forms, such as Arguedas or Cortázar. It is justifiable for Aguirre's work that he has omitted a large number of critical studies on *The City and the Dogs*, since his purpose is not oriented to the analytical and interpretative work of the work itself, but seeks the mere contextualization of the book's publication. And this documentary work, like that of Sergio Vilela (2003), contributes to the reader's deepening and approach to the details of this first novel by Mario Vargas Llosa.

Dissolvable Phallocentrism in the Novels of Mario Vargas Llosa

The concepts that arise from the theorization of Latin American literature originate the revelation of the contact with the West and North America. One of these features is the way in which the novel has been constructed, which must have certain stylistic and technical attributes, typical of the literary genre. Mario Vargas Llosa is a conscientious reader. He knew how to extrapolate the literary techniques used by classic and canonical authors of universal literature, such as those influenced by cinema (*close up*, *flash back*, etc.), counterpoint techniques, the unfolding of things (fragmentation, multiplicity or simultaneity of planes, spaces, minds, characters and narrators), multiple points of view, the use of interior monologue, communicating vessels, Chinese boxes (or the story within the story) and the breaking of the story line. From this modality, the Peruvian author achieved an impact on Latin American narrative, which was called *boom*. Through his prose, he allowed many readers to approach more complex authors with greater speed and understanding.

The text *Lituma in the Andes* (2014) is an example of how Vargas Llosa was able to articulate his literary techniques in order to extol Andean culture and a historical period of socio-political violence in the Peruvian territory. Had he done otherwise, the impact would have been different. This is due to the fact that there is already an aesthetics of reception that rules worldwide, not only in literature, but also in cinema or mass media. Its frequent themes are violence, the predominance of action over scenes of constant dialogue or retrospective intrusions of the characters, as well as the absence of descriptive

passages, etc. With Vargas Llosa, the approach is more convincing and innovative. In this regard, Victor Quiroz (2009) highlights Vargas Llosa's particular treatment of Andean culture, since he focuses on three essential topics: postulating the notion of the Andean subject from a point of marginality (colonialization), representing him as a barbarian subject (who rejects modernizing culture) and implementing themes related to violence (a heading that has served to develop novels with topics that allude to Sendero Luminoso, the Armed Forces, the Police Forces, the MRTA, etc.).

To understand Peruvian culture from the aforementioned perspective could become attractive, since one would learn new literary techniques and would be dazzled by the ways of criminality that develop before human beings. But to rescue the Andean culture from its own autonomy, with its own techniques of its history and its own form of civilization? There are works in this regard, texts in Quechua or native languages, but their dissemination is not very well known, disseminated and commented in national university environments. It only remains as a contribution for archaeologists and anthropologists, however, it does not reach a greater interculturality, that hegemonic Other, with insatiable needs of modernity.

On the other hand, Victor Quiroz (2009) mentions that a latent theme in Andean literature is related to the phallocentric conception, where there is a predominance of the masculine over the feminine. This is a sign that the colonialist and subalternizing way of interrelating between cultural groups still survives. This is notorious in the capital, and has also been projected in Vargas Llosa's novels, as in *Pantaleón y las visitadoras* (2005), where men have this facility to appropriate women by their very biological necessity, regardless of their symbolic and hegemonic role in the military world. This theme will be frequent in other of her publications; even the roles will be changed, as it happens in *Travesuras de la niña mala* (2010), where there is a position contrary to the phallocentric one: the woman adopts the role of dominance over her sexual life. She chooses, marginalizes, sanctions, prohibits, lies and is unfaithful. There is no one who can mobilize her to a plane of submission. In view of this, would it be possible to project these forms of dealing with ethics and aesthetics in the Andean culture? Is the proposal of a woman from that region, capable of carrying out such actions in the West, a credible one? If so, would it have any impact or would there be any de-virtualization of its prototype? In *Lituma in the Andes* (2014), the woman is desired, but also struggles in the face of adversity. She travels, she moves, she does not allow

herself to be dominated. This does not mean that she is not linked to violence: a frequent theme drawn from the Andean world.

In conclusion, the techniques used in Peru have helped to contact the Andean world and to know it in its totality, but have not solved the problem of looking at their society under those self-configuring premises, such as referring to it as an "otherness". In synthesis, the three Latin American writers were able to demonstrate the shortcomings of societies in the mid-20th century. Their governments sponsored a dictatorial and repressive status, which was evidenced by the degrading and criminal exercise of the military entities. In the same way, the different abuses of which many were unjustly victims were shown in literature.

In the case of "La vecina orilla", Uruguayan Mario Benedetti succeeded in demonstrating from his literary discourse the repercussions of this type of harmful government. Those after-effects were notorious in the expressions of his characters and the configuration he gave to the respective spaces set. Something similar happened with *Prisión perpetua* by Ricardo Piglia, who sought to consolidate the memory of those who went through those abuses. Likewise, it was possible to deduce that many details are not feasible to be included in an official record of history, so that the reading of an academic discourse of a plausible and realistic nature might not meet the expectations of anyone who seeks to find the truth in books. Finally, an analysis was made of the publication process of *The City and the Dogs*, together with the problems that hinder finding a reader interested in the different mishaps that the citizens of a whole country go through. From this, it was possible to conclude that there are hegemonic-falocentric interests that exclude any other modality that does not fit the stereotypes ruled by the literary or the sociopolitical.

This work only took into account three Latin American authors, so a later study on other canonical and not so well known authors in these last two centuries is not ruled out. Moreover, it has been a deliberate omission not to mention any type of literary production that at that time had extolled the events of those years. To have an analysis contrary to the one made in this opportunity would allow to reformulate the vision that would be taken into account of Latin America in those years where the military and dictatorial government prevailed. However, this was not the purpose of this work, which is why the contrast was not made. This does not rule out the possibility of future research oriented to the debate originated by this literary approach.

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