

# Reading beyond the Dada Engine: History and Myth in Mario Vargas Llosa's *La guerra del fin del mundo*

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**Annotation.** This paper revisits the complex phenomenon of Latin American historical fiction and optimal ways of reading it according to the challenges of today. Based on the novel *La guerra del fin del mundo* by Mario Vargas Llosa, the present research offers a take on Latin American history and myth as mutually influenced and equally legitimate discourse-forming forces. While rethinking the War of Canudos in its historical and novelized versions, the paper tackles some mythocritical techniques and principles of reader-response approach as powerful tools for preserving memory through reinterpreting historical fiction.

**Keywords:** *history, historical novel, Latin America, myth, Vargas Llosa M., War of Canudos*

Today, an approach to fiction we would want to call efficient and promising will most likely mean an in-depth reader-response perspective and will reach beyond the text towards philosophy, culture, politics, and daily life in a truly hermeneutic circle. In this case, we face, again, a question of how, throughout our metamodernist exodus, to read contemporary historical fiction and not to lose ourselves in the Desert of the Real, within and beyond the act of fiction. An author who plays history-fiction transgression in an ever so tricky manner is Mario Vargas Llosa. We will briefly approach the problem of historicism in his novel *The War of the End of the World (La guerra del fin del mundo, 1981)* to look for the ways of reinterpreting Latin American historical fiction considering the worries, threats, and promises of today.

In his magnum opus *The Decline of the West*, Oswald Spengler stresses the key role of the Gestalt in every cultural community, defining this as the Form in a culture that stores and reflects “its own ideas, its own passions, its own life, will and feeling, its own death” [5, p. 21]. Hence, the only way to explore a culture is deep intuitive contemplation of these Gestalts, which presupposes “overpassing the present as a research-limit, and predetermining the spiritual form, duration, rhythm, meaning and product of the still unaccomplished stages of our [...] history”. This is a function that the German historian metaphorically called physiognomy. We can go on with Spengler here and will allow ourselves to put an extensive explanation of this receptive route that never lost its validity.

It is possible, given the physiognomic rhythm, to recover from scattered details of ornament, building, script, or from odd political, economic and religious data, the organic characters of whole centuries of history, and from known elements on the scale of art-expression, to find corresponding elements on the scale of political forms, or from that of mathematical forms to read that of economic. This is a truly Goethian method – rooted in fact in Goethe's conception of the prime phenomenon, which [...] can be extended, to a degree hitherto undreamed of, over the whole field of history [5, p. 112-113].

In his physiognomic approach, Spengler rejects the dictate of materialism and the rigor of linear historicism, stressing the primacy of customized reception schemata and importance of a holistic approach to cultural Gestalts. These principles are crucial for further development of the cross-cultural project in literary criticism as well as

for unleashing the decolonizing power of knowledge and memory, which is why Spengler's ideas are still up-to-date in the post-postmodern cultural context.

The urge of physiognomic contemplation has manifested the return of the Prodigal Son, in the person of humanity, to the myth, which has reclaimed its sense-forming function in each and every humanitarian discourse and is indeed a powerful episteme of today. Post-modern denial of the denotate and the rule of Nothing actually reveal a strive to the Absolute, while today's fragmented, decentralized yet all-inclusive rhizomatic perception of reality makes us seek the new center, the new hero, the new metanarratives, and rediscover the reference point of each complex phenomenon we face within symbolic order of everyday life. In this perspective, the myth is to be seen wider, i.e. as an invariant, a reference point, a certain supercultural order that springs from under sociopolitical superstructures motivated by the myth itself. The principle of hermeneutic circle preserves its validity: interpreting a text equals interpreting existence, the world, and the human in it. A holistic reader-response approach to a text as a context, along with a set of mythocritical methods, is quite instrumental within the metamodernist project of overcoming the postmodern crisis by transcending Andrew Bulhak's Dada Engine on the way out to new senses, with a great postmodern experience of omniperception behind. To get out of the vicious circle of Castalian-style recursive transition presented in the Post-modernism Generator by Bulhak and to go beyond the text, researchers should see the text as an ever so powerful tool for unlocking memory, exploring political ecology, and rethinking evolution rather than tackle all these as mere instruments to dissect the text.

In the case of the oxymoron that is historical fiction, which is only an oxymoron for those who perceive history as a discursive dictate, the receptive modus described above is the only constructive one. Perception of history in Mario Vargas Llosa is strongly defined by the specifics of his narrative, where Llosa's Imaginary, his numerous Personae, and historical reality are blended into rich and patchy fiction. In his memoir *A Fish in the Water (El pez en el agua, 1993)* as well as in his numerous interviews, Vargas Llosa explains that he would mix reality and fiction, for he never trusted his own memory or memory as such [6]. While historical facts introduced by Llosa are sometimes modified beyond recognition, up to losing

touch with reality, sheer fiction may conceal more actual and symbolic references to reality. For instance, a burlesque, phantasmagoric, tragicomic caricature that is Pedro Camacho of Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter (*La tía Julia y el escritor*, 1977) is based on a Bolivian *radi-novelas* writer Raúl Salmón.

In *La guerra del fin del mundo*, the readers get deceptively close to the realness as Llosa describes the War of Canudos, not merely a historical fact but the deadliest civil war in Brazilian history. The conflict between the state of Brazil and a group of about 30,000 marginal settlers of a newly founded community Canudos, North-western Bahia headed by a preacher Antonio Conselheiro came to a brutal end in October 1897, only after several unsuccessful attempts of its military suppression. The event novelized by M. Vargas Llosa had already been the subject of the novel *The Backlands (Os Sertões)*, 1902) by Euclides da Cunha and unlike da Cunha's telluric, racially determined take on the topic, converses with the entire tradition of history and myth in Latin America yet to be touched upon in the present article.

Antonio Conselheiro, or Consejero, in Llosa (hereinafter referred to as the Counselor) preached to his followers that the end of the world was imminent and that the political chaos caused by the arrival of the Republic was the work of the devil. In *La guerra del fin del mundo* (hereinafter referred to as *La guerra*), we can find more than one point of view as to this fact, most concealing conspiracy theories. One of the key characters, an anarchist journalist and revolutionary fighter of Scottish origin Galileo Gall is convinced that the Counselor has been bringing to life communist ideas, such as money and property abolition, class and sex equality and more, "hiding them behind the façade of religion for a tactical reason, namely the need to take into account the cultural level of his humble followers" [7, 48]. Republican positivists, in their turn, acquire a somewhat ironic ally in the person of Baron de Cañabrava, an aristocrat whose land was occupied by the community of Canudos. The plot thickens as a Republican journalist and editor Epaminondas Goncalves sends Gall to support Canudos rebels in their fight against the Republic in order to make a false impression that Bahian monarchists have united with rural rebels and British monarchy to overthrow the Republic.

Although history fails to clarify whether it was religion, politics, or anything in between that really guided Antonio Conselheiro, needless to say, both political and religious ideologies are utopias and one can easily read in fiction and witness in reality how, by means of one, people are fooled into another. Vargas Llosa distinguishes two kinds of utopias, i.e. collective utopia, which is a sociohistorical project, and individual utopia, an aspiration of a single mind [4, 20]. While these two are often stages of a single process, the Peruvian writer discards the collective utopia, supports the potential of the individual one, and uses both for twisting actual facts and fiction in his narrative. Achieving this subtle falsification effect proves even more instrumental considering the mass-oriented side to Llosa's novels.

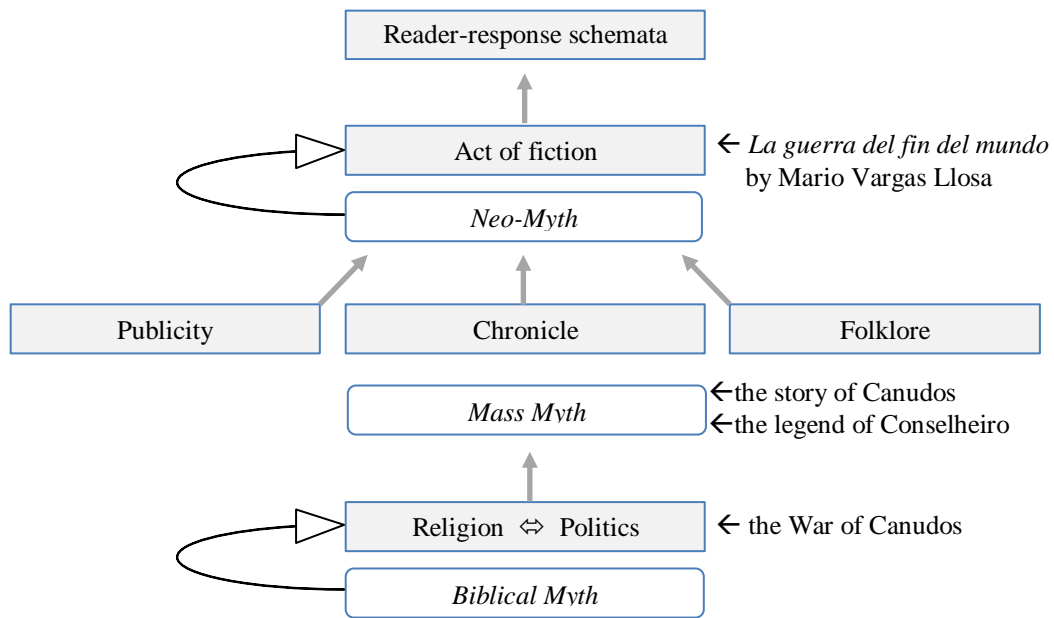
Thinking fiction as another form of reality is hardly ever an issue for a literary researcher of the rhizomatic

today, in the world of full-time transgression. That being said, historical fiction is still rather tricky to approach. Gerard Genette, in his *Figures III*, suggests that just like a figure of speech or indirect speech act may fail to accomplish its purpose because of the addressee's inability to decode it, the act of fiction may not happen as such because the addressee didn't perceive it as a fictional one [3]. In *La guerra*, Vargas Llosa's falsification effect, or  *fingimiento*, is reinforced by the third-person narration: an omnipresent epic narrator, who is expected to be the ultimate truth, tells the story of Canudos from numerous perspectives and, moreover, is often alternated by the letters written by Galileo Gall, which is yet another focalization in this archival narrative.

A line this vague between the true and fictitious as well as a special approach to history in fiction is not only Llosa's narrative staple but an important feature of Latin American literary tradition. There are a number of reasons that lie at the heart of this  *fingimiento* and 'unreliable' yet omnipresent historicism. One of these is Spanish *Siglo de Oro*, where *la-vida-es-sueño* liminality yielded a kind of metatheatrical transformation of history and myth. Another thing is the incipient Latin American novels that were imitating the real documents. In his major research *Myth and Archive: A Theory of Latin American Narrative*, Roberto González Echevarría explains how the early history of Latin America and the first fictions were told in a form of *cartas de relación*, by which both the newly discovered territory and its chronicler were enfranchised by the higher authority [2, p. 10]. Apart from these influences, there are also numerous Latin American indigenous myths and African religious traditions, all of these fantasticized in magic realism, intellectualized in Borges, resignified in the New Latin American novel, such as *Terra Nostra* (1975) by Carlos Fuentes, and postboom literature, *La guerra* by Vargas Llosa and Roberto Bolaño's *Nazi Literature in the Americas (La literatura Nazi en América)*, 1996) being a couple of many significant examples.

To some readers, Latin American novel must appear to be obsessed with Latin American history and myth. This has to do with its collecting or, as González Echevarría reasonably names it, archival function. Latin American novel is a 'myth of myths' that abounds with references to historical icons of the Americas. Since the myths are stories who deal with origins, the concern of Latin American fiction with Latin American history and myth is not only understandable but also more than legitimate. Latin American history has always concealed a promise of being not only new but different, this is the history of otherness that has endured centuries without being acknowledged and, referring to González Echevarría again, may have proved "as useful a hermeneutic tool for probing human nature as a classical myth" [2, p. 6].

Without a certain epistemological privilege (i.e. deep knowledge of history) and an empiric skill of separating historical trivia from invented facts, you may just as well read *La guerra* by Vargas Llosa as fairy tale or rather as an author's neo-myth, which is, again, a good example of unintentional state of fiction that acquires different illocutive formulations on various stages of the chronological chain, as seen in the scheme below:



Scheme 1.

Mass myth is a significant element to the Gestalts of Latin American cultures and Vargas Llosa never hesitated to reveal and exploit this in his body of work. One of the most explicit examples is the already mentioned *La Tía Julia y el escribidor*, a novel that revisits pragmatics of *radionovelas* and the cult of their authors in a complex and ironic way. In his story of Canudos, Llosa testifies development of a mass myth, which, in turn, holds on to a myth as such. Historically as well as in Llosa's novel, the mass myth is Antonio Conselheiro's promise of the Kingdom of Holy Spirit, with its capital in Canudos, going undercover for anti-republican communist-like ideas or not, the promise "of peace, of the life to come, in which sin and pain [will] disappear [...] once the Devil [is] overthrown" [7, p. 68]. This worked as a Matthew 5 convincing enough for the outcasts of Bahian *sertão* (backlands) to settle in Canudos in 1893 and fight a bloody rebel war with the Devil, which was the state of Brazil. Blessed are the marginal, for the margins shall be the new center. This mass myth acquires a new status of what some researches would call neo-myth through the controversies of publicity, to which the civil conflict was subjected within the fictional space of *La guerra*, through historical chronicles, folklore, and then, again, via Llosa's performative act of writing, all these making Canudos a legend, a myth, and history in one.

Vargas Llosa portrays recreation of Christian mythology in the New World not merely by addressing the topic in *La guerra*, but also by means of ironical travesty of the Holy Bible. The mythologeme of the Kingdom of God, logically, presupposes a messiah in the person of the Counselor. María Cuadrado, the Counselor's devoted follower, parodically reenacts the Passion and is called not The Mother of God but The Mother of Men. By this, the divinity of the Counselor and his followers is denied: Cuadrado can hardly be called the loving mother because she killed her child, nor is she virgin, for she had been raped four times. There is also el León de Natuba, who, with his grotesquely large head on a tiny torso, is an ex-

PLICIT caricature of the apostle; Sandra Fernandes Erickson and Glenn suggest that Vargas Llosa was referring to apostle Mark, whose symbol is the lion [1].

As for the figure of Christ, the plot reveals certain duality by introducing a secular prophet Galileo Gall, who has to be sacrificed for the Revolution cause, which is why Epaminondas sends Caifás to kill him. The image of messiah in the novel gets doubled, twisted, and also militarized, yielding a transcultural blend of *guerrillero* and Jesus Christ, of *gaucho* and Redeemer, Brazilian Martin Fierro or Che Guevara, you name it. None of the two Christs will be crucified: the Counselor dies of dysentery and Galileo deceases, ironically, in a hand-to-hand fight with his guide Rufino, who introduced Bahia to him.

Apart from being the second Christ in the novel, Galileo Gall symbolizes a mythical presense of a European in Latin America. He is a Columbus in his unwillingness to abandon his ideas and face the Latin American reality, he is a Cortes in his rape of Jurema. Like all of them, Gall is writing for Europeans presenting his politically engaged interpretations of the New World, where he fails to build communication with the local settlers and is constantly called *estúpido* by those he tries so hard to influence. Gall's language is also hard to understand, which indicates his zero point hybris and foreigner's worldview rather than his Portuguese skills. The figure of Galileo performs an archival function in the novel, stressing the key role of memory in building intercultural and transcultural communication.

"What had changed in the calamity-ridden North now that there was a president instead of an emperor? Whasn't the tiller of the land still fighting against the barrenness of the soil and the scarcity of water...?" *La guerra del fin del mundo* explores a case of Unamunian *intrahistoria* omnipresent in Latin American sociohistorical discourse. The drought-ridden *sertão* is the 'desert of the Real' [8] transformed into a neo-myth by the people. Unlike racial and geographic determinism in da Cunha's text, Llosa's novel brings to light the human nature as the key factor in

writing and reading history. In his signature, naturalistic yet extremely romanticized way, Llosa reveals the bestial shadow and fanatic drive as an underlay of a major historical event.

We are not at the end of the world, nor shall we witness its new beginning. Persistence of memory, however, is a key to questioning history and its objectivity, which is

ever so important for Latin American sociocultural and political decolonization, a project with a long way yet to go. These brief thoughts on historicism in Latin American literature trigger our further thesis research on the neomyth in Mario Vargas Llosa and outline a great discourse-forming potential of reading contemporary Latin American historical fiction.

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