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Conflict between authoritarianism and liberalization: *The Feast of the Goat* by Mario Vargas Llosa

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Abstract--Vargas Llosa worked on the terms by clarifying and illustrating the liberal principles that underpin it through a detailed examination of his most recent novel the Feast of the Goat (2000). The goal of this reading of the novel is not to evaluate the text's socio-historical fidelity or to investigate the mimetic processes of the narrative; however interesting these concerns may be, they are the subject of a different type of study. Instead, this article will focus on the novel's exploration of the conflict between authoritarianism and liberalism, specifically between the tyrants will to power and the people's free will, in terms of democratic practice and individual liberty. Vargas Llosa's novel can be traced back to the mid-1970s when he filmed Captain Pantoja and the Special Service in the Dominican Republic. However, as Vargas Llosa (in Jaggi 2002:31) notes, "Fujimori was quite different from Trujillo, a more mediocre tyrant." Money was his main ambition and appetite. What Trujillo desired was power. However, Vargas Llosa's novel differs from the dictator novels of Bastos, Carpentier, and Marquez. Whereas they used allegorical and even magic-realist techniques to create characters abstracted from actual historical reality, Vargas Llosa has chosen to focus in a minute, meticulously researched detail on the very real figure of Rafael Leonidas Trujillo, dictator of the Dominican Republic from 1930 to 1961. The novel suggests that there is something beyond all that has allowed Trujillo to seize control of the entire country and then maintain that control unwaveringly for over three decades. The Feast of the Goat dramatizes the reality of absolute power's corrupting effects; it also investigates how little value people often place on their freedom.

Keywords--Liberty, Authoritarianism, Republic, Assassination, Historical reality, Freedom, Oppression, Tyranny.

Introduction

Mario Vargas Llosa is a rarity in contemporary Latin American literature; he is a writer who embodies liberal values in his novels and has openly, consistently, and resolutely championed the cause of liberal democracy in his nonfictional writing for the past few decades or so. This paper aims to provide a more supportive assessment of Vargas Llosa's work on its terms by clarifying and illustrating the liberal principles that underpin it through a detailed examination of his most recent novel, *The Feast of the Goat* (2000). In this text, he shifts his critical focus away from what he sees as the inevitable destructiveness of socialist utopianism and towards the equally destructive nature of right-wing authoritarianism, as manifested in this case by Rafael Leonidas Trujillo's grim thirty-one-year dictatorship in the Dominican Republic. The article will briefly trace Vargas Llosa's political evolution as a liberal before carefully examining the novel itself. The goal of this reading of the novel is not to evaluate the text's socio-historical fidelity or to investigate the mimetic processes of the narrative; however interesting these concerns may be, they are the subject of a different type of study. Instead, this article will focus on the novel's exploration of the conflict between authoritarianism and liberalism, specifically between the tyrants will to power and the people's free will, in terms of democratic practice and individual liberty. It is hoped that the novel's broader political relevance and significance will become clear. (Williams, 2001)

Three pivotal moments in his ideological development stand out as having a direct bearing on *The Feast of the Goat* and are thus worth mentioning. The first is his hatred of his father's violent, disciplinarian excesses (he met him for the first time when he was ten years old) and his harrowing experiences at Lima's Leoncio Prado military academy, which indeed provided him with a unique insight into the brutality and prejudice of Peruvian society under General Odría's 1948-1956 military rule. Their long-standing friendship ended in a fistfight in a Mexico City cinema in 1975. Vargas Llosa's departure from the intellectual left coincided with a significant shift in his literary priorities. Moving away from the politically serious style of his early works, he rediscovered "the secret, sinful passion" (Vargas Llosa 1991: 3) he had always had for writers like Jorge Luis Borges. He then wrote a series of irresistibly funny and erotic novels, like *Captain Pantoja and the Special Service* (1973) and *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* (1977), which were based on his real-life elopement with and marriage (1988).

When he returned to Lima in 1974 after a sixteen-year vacation in Europe, he was concerned about the dangerous political extremism in Latin America, which came from both the Right and the left. In 1977, for example, as President of the writers' organization International PEN, he issued an open letter condemning the Argentine dictator Jorge Videla. On the other hand, he became increasingly concerned about the emergence of violent socialist movements in his native Peru, such as Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path). In response to this extremism, Vargas

Llosa decided to run for Peruvian President in 1990. He was eventually defeated by the subsequent dictator, Alberto Fujimori. Still, as his 1993 memoir.

This series of novels, *The War of the End of the World* (1981), *The Real Life of Alejandro Mayta* (1984), *Death in the Andes* (1993a), and, more recently, *The Way to Paradise* (2003a), enraged left-wing critics and fellow writers, leading to Vargas Llosa's demonization as a reactionary conservative. Far from being a conservative or what Michael Valdez Moses has floridly if inaccurately referred to as “the eminence grise of Latin American neoliberalism” (2002: 1), he is a classical liberal who upholds “the basic principles of liberalism political democracy, the market economy, and the defense of individual interests over those of the state” (2002: 1). (2005: 3). This fundamental belief in the principle of individual liberty and autonomy distinguishes Vargas Llosa's thought from both the Right and the left and lends his work a distinct quality. Many of his books look at how utopian socialism can be destructive. In *The Feast of the Goat*, he looks at how authoritarian extremism can also be destructive.

The Feast of the Goat

The Feast of the Goat belongs to the emerging Latin American dictator novel subgenre, which includes, initially, Miguel Angel Asturias' *The President* (1946), and more recently, Augusto Roa Bastos' *In the Supreme* (1974), Alejo Carpentier's *Reasons of State* (1974), Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *Autumn of the Patriarch* (1975), and Tomas Eloy Martinez's *The Perón Novel* (1985). Vargas Llosa's novel can be traced back to the mid-1970s when he filmed *Captain Pantoja and the Special Service in the Dominican Republic*.

However, Vargas Llosa's novel differs from the dictator novels of Bastos, Carpentier, and Marquez. Whereas they used allegorical and even magic-realist techniques to create characters abstracted from actual historical reality, Vargas Llosa has chosen to focus in a minute, meticulously researched detail on the very real figure of Rafael Leonidas Trujillo, dictator of the Dominican Republic from 1930 to 1961. Even though the novel is mostly based on history, Vargas Llosa has made up many details to show what the dictatorship was like or, as he says (in Lopez-Calvo 2005: 34), to show “what history cannot show.” As a result, the novel's goal is to reveal the minds of both the dictator and his victims and, as Lionel Abrahams (1987: 152) put it in another context, “to go where journalism and historiography do not have to go into the core of the individual experience, where politics, economics, conflict, and disruption are not just thought but undergone and felt.”

The Feast of the Goat serves as a powerful and profound meditation on the nature and meaning of those classically antagonistic human aspirations: power and freedom. On the one hand, it examines the recurring desire for power and the seemingly inexplicable ability of humans to surrender their own free will to the dictates of a single megalomaniacal man. As a result, the novel resonates not only with recent Latin American dictatorships, but with the entire twentieth-century history of charismatic authoritarian leaders, from Hitler, Mussolini, and Franco, to Stalin and Mao, to any number of African tyrants and, indeed, with any socio-political situation in which individuals give up their liberty, voluntarily or

otherwise, for the sake of some other apparent good. The Feast of the Goat, like many of Mario Vargas Llosa's novels, is composed of multiple perspectives and temporal frames. The novel's pivotal event is the assassination of dictator Trujillo on Tuesday, May 30, 1961. Trujillo is dubbed "the Goat" because of his caprine proclivities, both sexual and otherwise. The title of the novel (and its epigraph) is based on a meringue or popular song, "They Killed the Goat," which commemorates the day of his death: However, the events leading up to this fateful day, as well as its terrible aftermath, is told in three different, alternating narrative lines.

The people celebrate
and go all the way
for the Feast of the Goat
the thirtieth of May.

The first is Urania Cabral, the daughter of one of the Trujillo's inner circle, who returned to the Dominican Republic for the first time in 1996 after an unexplained thirty-five-year exile in the United States; the second is Trujillo himself, as the novel follows him through the elaborate itinerary of his final day; and the third is his four main assassins, turning their thoughts over in their minds as they wait anxiously for the moment of execution. Urania's re-creation of her father's reasons for betraying her and her family's reactions to her present-day disclosures; the revelation of the characters of Trujillo's subordinates through his thoughts and interactions with them; and, through the assassins' introspection, the personalities of other co-conspirators in the attempted coup. Indeed, because the assassination occurs less than halfway through the novel, we can delve deeper into the minds of two other key characters: General José René "Pupo" Román, a leading conspirator who finds himself unable to act decisively after the assassination and is then destroyed in the ensuing retaliation; and Dr Joaquin Balaguer, the insignificant puppet president who seizes the moment of Trujillo's death to Through the novel's multiple perspectives and complicated shifts, it can present both a detailed account of conditions in the Dominican Republic in May 1961, as well as a panoramic sweep of the country's history from its earliest colonization to the present day, though centred on Trujillo's rule. The result is a rich depiction of a specific moment in time, played out both on the pages of political history and in the intimate lived experience of individual human beings.

Urania

Urania Cabral's return to the Dominican Republic's capital, Santo Domingo, appears as hasty and unplanned as her departure from it as a fourteen-year-old schoolgirl 35 years earlier. She is a successful New York lawyer who has returned to see her dying father, but her visit is motivated by neither compassion nor duty. The reasons for her initial departure, her lengthy exile and silence, and her return are gradually revealed as the novel progresses. While her story appears only tangentially related to the central narrative thrust at first, its significance grows more pointed with time. Urania's chapters all take place on the same day when she visits her father in their old, now decidedly shabby house, meets up with her cousins, Lucinda and Manolita, and then has dinner with them and her father's

sister, Adelina, that evening. The story she eventually tells throughout the evening reveals as much as anything in the novel about what it was like to live “under the goat,” as John Powers (2001:1) put it.

Her mother died in an accident when she was very young, and she was raised by her father, whom she adored, but it appears that this is precisely why she feels such venomous hatred and rage towards him now: “During those years, your father was both a father and a mother.” That is why you adored him. That's why it hurt so much for you, Urania (p. 13). Her father is now over eighty years old and “just a piece of a man” (p. 186), having suffered a cerebral hemorrhage some time ago. Despite his inability to speak or even understand, Urania interrogates him bitterly about the past, particularly the Trujillo Era: “The most important thing that happened to us in five hundred years.” That was something you used to say with such conviction. That's correct, Papa. All the evil we have carried with us since the Conquest crystallized during those thirty-one years (p. 55).

Senator Agustin Cabral, President of the Senate, had been one of Trujillo's closest and most valued advisors. As Urania points out, they had always been nothing more than “filthy rags” (p. 63) to the dictator. She says that through her years of thorough and obsessive research on the Dominican Republic during the Trujillo era, she has come to understand things that seemed “impenetrable” before, such as

how so many millions of people, crushed by propaganda and lack of information, brutalised by indoctrination and isolation, deprived of free will and even curiosity by fear and the habit of servility and obsequiousness, could worship Trujillo. Not merely fear him but love him, as children eventually love authoritarian parents, convincing themselves that the whippings and beatings are for their own good. (p. 63)

Trujillo

For the novel's first half, Urania is almost completely overshadowed by Trujillo's towering personality. Far from being a figure of evil or a quasi-mythological villain, Vargas Llosa's Trujillo is a true-life character, a plausible embodiment of supreme corruption and greed, depicted throughout the novel with remarkable authenticity. “I didn't want to present Trujillo as a grotesque monster or a brutal clown, as is typical in Latin American literature,” Vargas Llosa says. “I wanted a realistic version of a human being who became a monster due to his gathered power and lack of resistance and criticism” (Jaggi 2002: 31). To that end, Trujillo's character is revealed from the inside, through the febrile, rancorous workings of his inner consciousness and his interactions with his terrified, cowed underlings, rather than being described or asserted. But perhaps the true genius of Vargas Llosa's creation is that Trujillo's entire being is revealed in a single day, his final day, as he goes about the business of controlling his country and his world with ruthless efficiency while struggling to control the failings of his ageing, sixty-nine-year-old body with a barely marginalized rage of frustration.

However, Trujillo's murderous ways have recently become too much for even his oldest and closest allies, and when the novel begins, Trujillo is increasingly isolated and embattled on several fronts. For starters, his regime is attempted the

assassination of the Venezuelan President Rómulo Betancourt and has imposed sanctions imposed by all Organization of American States (OAS) members, rapidly crippling his country's economy. Second, the assassination of the dissident Mirabal sisters on November 25, 1960, galvanized several underground organizations into more direct action and prompted many other individuals (including some of Trujillo's actual assassins) to seek his immediate removal. Third, his continued flagrant violation of human rights has prompted the Catholic Church, once his "steady ally" (p. 264), to condemn his rules of "oppression and tyranny" (p. 216). Fourth, and perhaps most importantly, Trujillo's excesses have finally worn down American patience so that he has "stopped being the spoiled darling of Yankee governments and [has] become an embarrassment attacked by the press and many in Congress" (p. 306), and his removal from power is becoming increasingly demanded.

A critical question raised and explored by the novel is how someone like Trujillo can exercise his power in such abusive and inhumane ways without anyone being able to stand up to him or criticize him even mildly. Trujillo has eliminated his most formidable opponents and surrounded himself with capable but utterly self-congratulatory aides eager to cater to his every whim. Urania describes the motivations of men like Senator Henry Chirinos, and especially her father, as "Trujillo pulled a vocation for masochism up from the bottom of your souls, that you were people who needed to be spat on, mistreated, and debased to be fulfilled" (p. 64).

The novel suggests, there is something beyond all that has allowed Trujillo to seize control of the entire country and then maintain that control unwaveringly for over three decades. Friedrich Nietzsche's concept of "the will to power," an extraordinary individual emerges who is willing to overcome any odds to achieve God-like power over his inferior fellows and eschewing the common herd's "slave morality," establishes himself as their absolute master. As Trujillo asserts early in the novel, no other Dominican has "a millionth of his energy, will, and vision" (p. 24). Later, he remarks, "He had never cared very much about money." He put it to use in the service of power" (p. 147). During his dictatorship, he worked hard to gain power: "in every sphere political, military, institutional, social, and economic he had accumulated such extraordinary power that all the dictators the Dominican Republic had seen in its entire history as a republic compared to him" (p. 94).

As bad as Trujillo's tyranny is by international and historical standards, there is one more damaging feature of the uniquely Latin American dictator or caudillo, and that is the manifestation of the hallowed cultural institution of machismo, exaggerated masculinity that constantly needs to prove itself, on at least one level, in the area of sexual prowess. In a smart review of Trujillo, Laura Miller (2002, p. 1) said, "Never has a novel more ferociously drawn the dangerous political potential of crude, unrestrained masculinity."

Throughout the novel, an explicit link is made between the caudillo tradition's exercise of power and its symbolic expression in sexual mastery. Early on, Trujillo associates ambition and the will to power with masculine sexuality, as exemplified by his former son-in-law, Porfirio Rubirosa, "the Dominican known worldwide for

the size of his prick and his prowess as an international cocksman.” That walking cock spurred ambition. What better ambassador for the Dominican Republic could there be than a cocksman like him?” (Pages 24-25)

However, just as Trujillo's political power is embodied through his physical and sexual control, his warning political supremacy is signified by the physical deterioration of his body by the time the novel begins. Though he has refused to admit it, he has had prostate cancer for some time, which, along with his advancing years, has had two severe demeaning effects on him: incontinence and impotence. The first effect is especially annoying for a man who has long taken pride in his appearance: “cleanliness, caring for his body and his clothing, had been, for him, the only religion he practiced faithfully” (p. 22). When he wakes up to start his day, he discovers much to his dismay, that he has once again soiled his sheets:

Damn it! Damn it! This wasn't an enemy he could defeat like the hundreds, the thousands he had confronted and conquered over the years, buying them, intimidating them, killing them. This lived inside him, flesh of his flesh, blood of his blood. It was destroying him at precisely the time when he needed to be stronger and healthier than ever. (p. 18)

Significantly, Trujillo only prays to God when he is preparing for a sexual assignment with another teenage girl and fears that he will be unable to perform: “Dear God, do this for me.” I'm not interested in the priests, gringos, conspirators, or exiles. I can get rid of all that shit myself. But I need your assistance to fuck that girl “(p. 339). However, he never gets the chance because he is gunned down by his assassins on the way to his tryst at Mahogany House, his ranch and country pleasure dome in San Cristobal. Ironically, the assassins can precisely devise and execute their plan because of Trujillo's rigidly predictable routine and habitual appetites. The Goat can be killed because he is obsessed with order and precision and his desire for sexualized power, which he thought were the most important parts of his identity.

Assassins

Though many people were involved in the plot to assassinate Trujillo, the novel focuses on the four main assassins of the dictator: Lieutenant Amado Garcia Guerrero (Amadito), Antonio de la Maza, and Antonio Imbert, and Salvador Estrella Sadhalá (Turk). Each has his reasons for wanting to exact revenge on Trujillo. Still, most of them also have more general, moral reasons for wanting to end Trujillo's tyranny. They cherish a vision of the kind of country that the liberated Dominican Republic could become. As the novel traces each man's story in turn revealed in their thoughts and memories while waiting anxiously in their car on the highway for Trujillo's vehicle to appear a more comprehensive picture emerges, not just of the Republic under Trujillo's rule, but also of an enlightened political alternative to authoritarian dictatorships in general.

Antonio de la Maza, for example, has personal reasons for wanting to kill “the devil who is thirty-one years had violated and poisoned [the country] more than anything else it had suffered in its history... More than anything else, he could

not forgive that, just as he had corrupted and brutalized this country, the Goat had also corrupted and brutalized Antonio de la Maza” (p. 89). However, with a more mature perspective than the youthful Amadito, de la Maza can see how his fate is linked to that of the nation as a whole as he considers the underlying reasons for Trujillo's extraordinary hold over his countrymen: “It was something more subtle and indefinable than fear: it was the paralysis, the numbing of determination, reason, and free will, which this man, groomed and adorned to the point of absurd (p. 104).

For these reasons, de la Maza feels justified in ending “the witches' sabbath that the country's history had become” (p. 104). Despite everything, he says, “this was a beautiful country [and] it would be even more beautiful” in a new liberal democratic epoch when the Dominican Republic would “finally be a normal country, with an elected government, a free press, and a system of justice worthy of the name” (p. 108).

He reflected on Trujillo's perverse system, one in which all Dominicans eventually became accomplices, a system from which only exiles (not always) or the dead could escape. “Everyone in this country had been, was, or would be a part of the regime somehow” (p. 169). He, like de la Maza, can see a future after Trujillo's rule, one in which the people regain their freedom and can exercise their civil and common liberties in an atmosphere of openness and opportunity:

Perhaps this was why he decided that Trujillo had to die. So that he and other Dominicans could recover their ability to at least accept or reject the work they did to earn a living. Tony did not know what that was like. Perhaps as a child he knew, but he had forgotten. It must be nice Everything must leave a more pleasurable sensation in your body and spirit when you had what Trujillo had taken away from Dominicans thirty-one years ago free will. (pp. 169-170)

As a result, in a Pastoral Letter read aloud in every church across the country on Sunday, January 24, 1960, the Dominican Church finally stands up to Trujillo and condemns his regime. For the first time, this critical document addresses “the deep suffering that afflicts so many Dominican homes” and “the millions of human beings who continue to live under oppression and tyranny,” for whom “nothing is secure: not their homes, their property, their liberty, nor their honor” (p. 216). The Letter reaffirms that “the root and foundation of all rights lie in the inviolate dignity of the human person” and that “all men have the right to freedom of conscience, freedom of the press, and freedom of association” (p. 216). Finally, in the pursuit of “harmony and peace,” the letter calls for the establishment of “the sacred rights of human brotherhood” in the nation (p. 216). The Church's strategy is to rally the Catholic majority against Trujillo, with the ultimate goal of removing him completely from power. It had the more immediate effect of spurring Turk into action, as he “considered, for the first time, the need to kill Trujillo” in the weeks following the letter's publication (p. 217). However, as a devout Catholic, he feels constrained by the Fifth Commandment.

It is less clear where Mario Vargas Llosa stands on this issue or whether the novel as a whole ultimately supports the assassins' actions. One of the most pressing issues confronting liberalism, not only in Latin America but throughout the

modern world, has been whether the use of violence to effect political change can ever be justified. However, the novel does confirm that there appears to be no alternative to the assassination. This is evident, for example, when the idea of staging a coup and deposing Trujillo is first presented to General "Pupo" Román, the head of the Armed Forces: Should I request his resignation?' Pupo was shocked. You've got the wrong man and the wrong country, compared. Don't you know who he is? He'll never let you kill him. And you'll never be able to persuade him to resign. You must murder him. "(p. 365; see also p. 82).

On the other hand, one recalls Vargas Llosa's famous spat with German author Günter Grass, whom he accused of "double standards" for supporting violent revolutions in Latin America that he would condemn in Western Europe (see Vargas Llosa 1996: 113). Perhaps the novel's true intention is to confront this most intractable of all liberal dilemmas and to reveal the full extent of the difficulty involved in an impossible historical moment such as that in the Dominican Republic in 1961: a choice between allowing Trujillo's brutal tyranny to continue or resorting to violence, even murder, to end it. It is strength rather than a weakness of Vargas Llosa as a liberal writer. He demonstrated how difficult it is to choose between these alternatives and how impossible it is not to choose.

The Aftermath

Although the assassins kill Trujillo, gunning him down in his car on the highway to San Cristobal, the coup fails initially. Following Trujillo's death, the plan was to install a temporary civilian-military junta led by General José René "Pupo" Román and then work toward establishing a fully representative democracy. However, Román faltered at the crucial moment and lost the opportunity. The retaliation is swift, thorough, and indescribably gruesome. They are led by Trujillo's dissolute and psychotic eldest son, Ramfis, who has returned from Europe to exact his revenge on the conspirators. Though he lacks his father's political ambition, he has inherited his father's capacity for merciless cruelty, which he now puts to terrifying use as the assassins are identified and hunted down. Amadio, one of the main assassins, is tracked down to his aunt's house and killed in a gunfight with the SIM. Antonio de la Maza and another conspirator, General Juan Tomás Daz, are apprehended and killed in a hail of bullets in Independency Park. Turk eventually surrenders and is taken to the infamous El Neuve prison. He is subjected to months of horrific torture alongside numerous other conspirators, their families, and many innocent people suspected of being involved in the plot. Finally, Ramfis takes Turk and the other secondary assassins (Pedro Livio Cedeno, Tunti Cáceres, Huáscar Tejada, and Fifi Pastoriza) from the prison and shoots them in cold blood. He then arranges for their bodies to be "disappeared." Only Antonio Imbert and another conspirator, Luis Amiama To, are alive after evading capture for nearly six months.

It is no coincidence, then, that Vargas Llosa has Urania return to the Dominican Republic in 1996, when "our perpetual president," as she puts it, relinquishes power and "Trujillism" may finally be said to have ended. She's speaking to her father, but by using Balaguer as an example, she emphasizes that despite his apparent lack of ambition or machismo, Balaguer became as driven by the will to power as Trujillo ever was:" 'Did power satisfy you so much that you didn't need

sex?" Even in this hot country, it happens. Didn't it happen to our perpetual President, Don Joaquin Balaguer? A bachelor at the age of ninety... I always thought that sex didn't interest him, that power gave him what other men got in bed. "(Page 190)... Despite having a different personality than Trujillo, Balaguer turns out to be just another Caudillo. Whereas Trujillo uses macho sexuality to express and assert his power, Balaguer chooses to replace sexuality with the exercise of pure political power. In both cases, though, the result is the same: absolute power in the hands of a single man and the loss of freedom and dignity for a whole people.

Once more, Urania

Although the novel depicts the end of Trujillo's political era, for many people, it is an era that will never truly end because they will carry their physical and psychological injuries with them for the rest of their lives.

This is certainly the case with Urania Cabral, whose personal story is given as much weight in the novel as the overall political sweep of Trujillo's regime. On one level, her violation at the hands of Trujillo, and her intense, long-lasting sense of trauma, serves as an allegory for the damage and destruction wrought by Trujillo's tyranny on the country as a whole. On another level, her personal experience gives a lasting human face to the horrible evil of the time and a specific, representative example of how Trujillo's ingrained and sometimes casual cruelty affected people.

Senator Agustin Cabral, has been ostracized by the Chief and turned into a political pariah for no reason other than to serve as an example of Trujillo's bizarre "loyalty tests" (p. 259). Marianita, Urania's young niece, observes that it all sounds like something from another planet or "like something from *The Trial*," Kafka's famous novel in which a man "is tried and executed, and he never finds out why" (p. 233). Cabral is devastated by his fall from grace. After dedicating his entire adult life to the Chief's service, his current fate is akin to obliterating his entire existence overnight (p. 185). He tries everything in his power to win back Trujillo's approval until he is finally, horrifyingly, persuaded by the ambassador, Manuel Alfonso, who takes pride in being "the Chief's procurer" (p. 316), that the way to "prove his affection and loyalty" and thus win's back Trujillo's approval is "to offer" him his pretty, fourteen-year-old virgin daughter (p. 314). So Urania becomes entangled in things she had previously been "totally innocent" of; "things that had to do with desire, instincts, power, and the infinite excesses and brutalities that a combination of those things could mean in a Trujillo-shaped country" (p. 321).

On the appointed day, she is taken to Trujillo's Mahogany House in San Cristobal for what she believes is a "party" (p. 319). Of course, this is the other meaning of the book's title because "fiesta" refers to a social gathering or function as well as a festival or feast-day, as in the song that celebrates Trujillo's death in the novel's epigraph (see Williams 2001: 269-270).

He had agreed to the young daughter of Senator Agustín Cabral coming to Mahogany House only to prove that Rafael Leonidas Trujillo Molina, despite

his seventy years, despite his prostate problems, despite his headaches with priests, Yankees, Venezuelans, conspirators, was still a real man, a stud with a prick that could still get hard and break all the virgin cherries that came his way. (pp. 464-465)

Trujillo's intended proof to himself of his enduring virility fails miserably, as he is unable to maintain an erection despite his best efforts. In a blinding fit of rage, he breaks the young girl's hymen. He then has a crying, swearing, ranting fit and sends the terrified child away.

The novel's ending (for the novel ends with Urania's story) appears overwhelmingly bleak, as in so much of Mario Vargas Llosa's fiction. Nonetheless, the novel offers some hope, however small compared to the larger historical forces depicted in the text. In a novel dominated by the power lust of violent and aggressive masculinity, it is not insignificant that the novel's final moments focus on a woman, Urania, and her discovery and rediscovery of her bonds with other women. She recalls, for example, that following her ordeal with Trujillo, it was the sisters at her school, and in particular, her favourite person, Sister Mary, who treated her with compassion and understanding, facilitating her transfer to the school in Michigan, preventing her father from seeing her, and, no doubt, saving her from "the belated rage of Trujillo" (p. 471; see p. 145). Despite her ordeal, she appreciates that "it taught me about Sister Mary's generosity, delicacy, and humanity... Without her, I'd be insane or dead" (p. 471).

Now I know what happened, what caused the silence that made us all so sad. Please return to see us, Urania. This is your country, and we are your family. "(Page 474). Perhaps most encouraging is her niece, Marianita, who is too young to have been exposed to and affected by Trujillo's particular vileness. She is the one who most accepts Urania as a beloved, injured aunt and who offers genuine hope for a meaningful relationship in the future: "I'm going to love you very much, Aunt Urania," she says in her ear, paralyzing Urania with sadness.

Conclusion

As Mario Vargas Llosa (in LopezCalvo 2005: 7) has observed, the institutions and traditions of liberal government have yet to take firm hold in the minds of the populace in many parts of the world, including the emerging democracies of Latin America: "Democracy, tolerance, and civic spirit are still an anomaly in history, a privilege." Living in the Western world gives one an erroneous perspective and makes one forget that the majority is barbarism, authoritarianism, and despotism. The Feast of the Goat, applies to any situation where the opposing forces of power and freedom collide. It is appropriate to conclude with two telling axioms of Lord Acton, the great nineteenth-century liberal historian whose essays on power and freedom continue to warn against abuses of authority and a reminder of the critical value of liberty. The first, from his correspondence with Bishop Creighton (Acton [1887] 1956: 364), is well-known: "All power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." However, not everyone is familiar with the preceding sentence: "Remember, where there is a concentration of power in a few hands, all too frequently men with gangster mentalities take control; history has proven that." Both sentences could have been written just for

Rafael Leonidas Trujillo. But, while *The Feast of the Goat* dramatizes the reality of absolute power's corrupting effects, it also investigates how little value people often place on their freedom. The novel chillingly demonstrates how easily people tend to give up their basic freedoms in exchange for some other ostensibly social or economic good and how difficult it is to reclaim those freedoms in the face of the tyranny and oppression that almost all always follows. In every way, *The Feast of the Goat* confirms Lord Acton's famous lecture on the history of freedom (1877; 1956: 74): "Liberty is not a means to a higher political end." It is the highest political goal in and of itself".

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