

A PARROT WITHOUT FEATHERS? VENTRILOQUY,
ORALITY, AND NOSTALGIA IN VARGAS LLOSA'S
THE STORYTELLER AND PAULINE MELVILLE'S
THE VENTRILOQUIST'S TALE

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ABSTRACT

This article seeks to shed new light onto the inscription of indigenous mythical tales in the contemporary postcolonial novel by way of a comparative and contrastive analysis of Vargas Llosa's *The Storyteller* (1987) and Pauline Melville's first novel *The Ventriloquist's Tale* (1997). It examines the narrators' oral tales that use ventriloquy to recuperate the voice of the other who emerges as both absent and present in the diverted language of the ventriloquist. The attempt to avert the loss of access to indigenous culture and its cosmogonies is considered here as a nostalgic gesture. Boym's distinction between restorative and transformative nostalgia allows one to underline how Vargas Llosa's and Melville's works further explore the paradox inherent in the act of inscribing non-Western oral myths within the novel, a genre associated with a written tradition.

KEYWORDS: Vargas Llosa, Melville, orality, nostalgia, Indigenous culture

The art of storytelling is reaching its end because the epic side of truth, wisdom, is dying out. [. . .] It is, rather, only a concomitant symptom of the secular productive forces of history, a concomitant that has quite gradually removed narrative from the realm of living speech and at the same time is making it possible to see a new beauty in what is vanishing.¹

Vargas Llosa's *El hablador* (1987) (*The Storyteller*—literally, the man who speaks) and Pauline Melville's first novel *The Ventriloquist's Tale* (1997), while published in different decades and in different languages, both endeavor to ventriloquize the voice of threatened Amerindian populations and explore the transcultural space between Europe and the Americas. Llosa's *El Hablador*² frames the exploration of Saúl Zuratas, a university student who leaves his Western way of life and becomes a "storyteller" for the Machiguenga nomadic Native Americans in the Peruvian Amazon. His journey is partly told by the novel's narrator who is reminded of his discussions with his former friend when he sees a photographic exhibition in Italy. In the odd chapters (III, V, and VII), the narrator of the story, who shares certain biographical traits with the author, pauses to give the floor to a storyteller, who mimics the storytelling of Machiguenga legends. This metadiegetical narrator is "el hablador" that the reader is invited to associate with Mascarita, the narrator's friend. Melville's *The Ventriloquist's Tale* relates the struggle of an indigenous Amerindian community, the Wapisianas, in the Rupununi Savannah of Guyana. Told by Macunaima, a playful ventriloquist narrator, a story of incest weaves between the colonial past of intrusions and "cultural advancement" and the postcolonial situation evoked in the figures of the anthropologist, the postcolonial literary critic or global aid humanitarian.

Central to both novels is the question of cultural intrusions and indigenous survival, assimilation, evangelization, and ventriloquy. Ventriloquizing in this context is to be considered in both its main meanings, that is a "production of the voice in such a way that the sound seems to come from a source other than the vocal organs of the speaker" and "the expression of one's views and attitudes through another."³ In the South American context, as Barzotto notes in his study of Melville's novel, *Interfaces culturelles: The Ventriloquist's Tale & Macunaima* (2011), ventriloquism refers to the Ameridians' survival camouflage strategy to mislead European invaders and retain their own culture.⁴ Both novels textualize, via several forms of ventriloquy, the thorny question of the (im)possible coexistence in Latin America of the disrupting modern Western culture and ancient oral traditions. In both cases, the cross-cultural encounter results in the inevitable destruction by modernization of jungle-dwelling indigenous cultures, the Machiguengas and the Wapisianas.

More than the spatial dynamic that structures Melville's and Llosa's novels and as both titles indicate, it is the way people inhabit space that is recounted and which is central to both novels. From this perspective, we suggest that the adversarial relationship between modernity and indigenous culture is not primarily treated in these novels as a subject, but as a narrative

problem. The same question arguably drives these two novels: how can the written word embrace the experience and epistemologies of indigenous oral cultures and, at the same time, respect their intrinsic otherness? What is their narrator's/author's own position on the indigenous world, since the loss of both is unbearable and yet inevitable? The title of each of the two novels gives us a first answer as they focus on the narrator's figure: the "storyteller"/the "ventriloquist," two terms that highlight creative resistance in the form of recounting. But to what extent do these narrators engage or fail to engage with orality? Is it possible for the written word to grasp the power and inherent qualities of the oral?

Ventriloquy as a mask and vocal substitute here refers to both the locus of silence of the other and an attempt at a possible representation of his/her world by way of concealment. Ventriloquy cunningly tricks absence and loss but in order to produce new meanings. But which ones? The comparative study we offer here argues that the ulterior narration of the ventriloquist responds to a loss made visible in the text through the recovery process inscribed in the narrative act itself symbolized by the figure of the parrot. This partial and contradictory recovery (what is recuperated in the act of telling is in any case lost in experience) can be observed in both *El hablador* and *The Ventriloquist's Tale* as part of a similar yet distinct nostalgic movement. Questioning the very nature of the nostalgic principle underlying the narrative act enables us to understand the inherent significance of the ventriloquy central to the novels under consideration. While the task of recounting the life of a world threatened with extinction is urgent, the narrative form of these two creative texts, characterized by their attention to voice, time/spatial perception and performativity, reflects an irreplaceable loss. How does this loss affect the narrator's position and the characters' trajectories in both novels?

The Storyteller's Masks to Face Cultural Destruction?

Vargas Llosa and Melville's novels intertwine two similar narrative voices: one modern (and written), the other archaic (written but reminiscent of orality). Vargas Llosa's *The Storyteller* records two narratives: the one of the intradiegetic narrator roaming in Florence and remembering his anthropologist friend Zuratas who, the narrator concludes from a photographic exhibition, has "gone native," and the narrative of *El Hablador* (in chapters III, V, and VII), the Machiguenga storyteller who exposes Machiguenga mythology from the inside and is supposedly Zuratas' own voice (metadiegetic

narrator). Melville's novel uses two narrative points of view as well: the narrator of the prologue and the epilogue, whose magic-realist trickster tale evokes a Wapisiana oral point of view, and the narrator of the central part of the novel, who apparently makes use of Western realistic modes of writing because that "is what is required these days."⁵ In both cases, the reader understands that behind these two narrators lies one unique figure: the man in Florence creates the voice of the *Hablador* while Sonny (or Danny) is the ventriloquist narrator of *The Ventriloquist's Tale*. The latter adopts two voices: the Amerindian voice of the prologue and epilogue written "in a style imitating oral storytelling"⁶ and considered by Ness as Melville's "true true voice"⁷ and the realist one which embodies the written word submitting to the motto "Realism is King, Fancy is in the dog-house" (VT 9). Both meta-diegetical narrators wear masks; if the notion of mask is more metaphorical in Sonny's/Danny's acts of ventriloquy, it is explicit in Vargas Llosa's novel, since the nickname of the protagonist is Mascarita, which means "little mask" and evokes both the Italian commedia and Molière's famous Mascarille.

Behind the intradiegetical narrators lie both Vargas Llosa and Melville, whom we can identify in the autobiographical traces of the respective novels. Vargas Llosa's narrator closely resembles Vargas Llosa himself, who studied in Lima, left for Europe as a PhD student at the end of the fifties and worked for the Peruvian television in 1981. Different critics highlight the importance of Vargas Llosa's first journey to the jungle in 1958 (event and date mentioned in the narrator's trajectory), the origin of his "obsession" with the Machiguengas. Another biographical fact mentioned in the novel is Vargas's Llosa's participation in the television program *Torre de Babel*, which led him back into the jungle in 1981. S. Lawson Welsh's⁸ (2002) and Robert Ness's (2007) comparisons between the Melville family and the McKinnons of the novel make it clear that Melville's text is also infused with autobiographical fragments. However, it is clear that she, although partly Wapisiana, is writing as both an insider and outsider and consequently ventriloquizing in her attempt to write from the perspective of Wapisiana Indians. In "Throwing One's Voice," Thieme questions Melville as authentic spokesperson, concluding that *The Ventriloquist's Tale* "still promotes a degree of intellectualized exoticism through its use of the Lévi-Strauss archetype."⁹ However, there are major differences between the two authors. Where Melville gives voice and strength to characters she feels close to, affirming that Amazonian native populations of the savannah will be able to survive as a distinct group only by isolating themselves from the outside world, Vargas Llosa seems more sympathetic and pessimistic when he affirms that "It is tragic to destroy what is still living, still a driving cultural possibility, but I am afraid we shall

have to make a choice . . . where there is such an economic and social gap, modernization is possible only with the sacrifice of the Indian cultures.”¹⁰ In many ways, Vargas Llosa’s narrator “serves as a projection of the writer’s desired role and status in late twentieth-century western society.”¹¹ Vargas Llosa is not an “insider”: he sees things from the point of view of a *criollo* from Lima, a position that is reinforced in the novel by the narrator’s living in Italy. However, where Vargas Llosa as author makes a choice (for the sacrifice of Amerindian cultures), as we will see, his narrator does not. The tension that grows between the main intradiegetic narrator and the storyteller Zuratas—a metadiegetic narrator—who chooses to move to Amazonia, is developed in the novel. Its most intimate contradictions are scrutinized, yet never solved; however, they are dealt with in depth via complex characters, who reinforce the metanarrative discussion at the heart of the novel.

What both writers foreground are self-aware storytellers of hybrid origins. Vargas Llosa’s text presents an ostracized Jewish man who has probably become the Machiguenga storyteller himself. Saul Zuratas, the narrator’s friend, is a young anthropologist from Lima who suffers from social discrimination because of his birthmark. Of Jewish origin, he is called “Mascarita,” a name that insists on both his cross-dressing and his status as a wandering Jew, moving hesitantly between his Jewish roots and the Creole-lima and Machiguengas cultures. The narrator’s disappearance, not in Israel where his family believes he has moved but in the jungle with the Machiguengas, symbolizes Saul’s path: the transformation of the “converso en hablador” (233) (“the transformation of the convert into the storyteller” [243]). According to Standish, the insistence on the presentation of Saúl as “converso” (“convert”) should be read as alluding to the New Testament and Saint Paul’s conversion. In Melville’s novel, the Ventriloquist, despite being the offspring of an incestuous relationship, has both European and Wapisiana grandparents. These subtle inscriptions of the diversity and dynamic cultural encounters among South American indigenous peoples (epitomized by the variations of the eclipse myth) combine to disprove the assumption that hybridity materialized after “primeval, separate, and distinct cultural orders.”¹² Of note is the fact that both narrators’ ostracizations are linked to Western cultures: Chico becomes an outcast because of the (Western) taboo of incest, Zuratas is an outcast because of his disfiguring birthmark and his religious and cultural affiliation (Jewish).

In a similar fashion and as a sort of literary camouflage that echoes the indigenous people’s need to escape Western intrusions, both narrators’ identities remain mysterious. Their identities can be explained partly by the Latin American tradition to which their stories relate. In Melville’s

The Ventriloquist's Tale, the trickster narrator is possibly a concealed Sonny, Beatrice and Danny's autistic son who is the result of their incestuous union. He changes his name as a strategy to escape conquest but it is supposed to mean "one who works in the dark" (VT 1). In the opening Prologue, the ventriloquist condemns Modernist writer Mario de Andrade for "consign[ing] [him] to the skies" (VT 1). In Andrade's picaresque critique of Modernity, *Macunaíama* (1928), a text intended as a national allegory that relied on the idea that Brazil's strength was its composite and dynamic culture, the story ends with Macunaíma's willful destruction of his own village and "an immense silence,"¹³ "suggesting that little might remain beyond spectral memory."¹⁴ Told by a parrot, which ultimately sets off to Lisbon, *Macunaíama* tells the story of the protean antihero Macunaima, who is born a Black Indian and magically turns into a white man. Based on colonial chronicles, legends, ethnographic texts, and fairy tales, among others, it focuses on a man who acts without logic: "Macunaíma is viscerally infantile, spontaneous, polymorphous perverse, moved by immediate feelings of pleasure and fear, a follower of the 'great rule of the least effort' living in a paradisiacal, pre-conscious and pre-logical mythical mental state."¹⁵ Melville's hero is also associated with the Macusi Macunaima, one of the two mythical brothers who chopped down "the wonderful tree with all the fruits of the earth in it" (VT 114) but who is also "indolent, willful, unapologetic, oversexed, selfish, disloyal and destructive."¹⁶ Via the image of the ventriloquist searching for the parrot in Europe, Melville borrows and engages with Andrade's text and anthropophagy in many ways. She writes back to Andrade by "reclaim[ing]" the diversity of the myth's widely varying indigenous origins that Andrade chose to de-emphasize when he rendered Macunaíama as a Brazilian hero."¹⁷ Melville also differs from Andrade because, "ultimately, she does not seem to believe in the cultural and racial multiplicity embodied by her trickster."¹⁸ But as Stephanides maintains, "If Andrade has cannibalized written texts [Andrade borrowed from a lot of written sources], Melville cannibalizes the orally transmitted history and myth of her border region,"¹⁹ emphasizing, as the narrator puts it in the prologue, that "Writing things down has made you forget everything" (VT 2). This assertion is challenged in the novel by the character of the anthropologist Wormoal, whom Melville presents in a negative and parodic light as he clearly acknowledges his destructive intrusion when attempting to record their customs in writing.

The paradox between preserving and destroying the other's cultural identity is also at the core of Vargas Llosa's narrative. By becoming a preserver of cultures, the storyteller is also destroying them: "by becoming an *habla-dor* he already transgresses his theory of nonintervention."²⁰ The dialogue

between the two protagonists highlights this process: “[Mascarita:] Que esas culturas deben ser respetadas, dijo [. . .]. Y la única manera de respetarlas es no acercarse a ellas. No tocarlas. Nuestra cultura es demasiado fuerte, demasiado agresiva. Lo que toca, lo devora. Hay que dejarlas en paz. ¿No han demostrado de sobra que tienen derecho a seguir siendo lo que son?” (EH 96–97). (“[Mascarita:] That these cultures must be respected” he said [. . .]. “And the only way to respect them is not to go near them. Not touch them. Our culture is too strong, too aggressive. It devours everything it touches. They must be left alone. Haven’t they amply demonstrated that they have the right to go on being what they are? [98–99].”) By foregrounding, at the level of diegesis, questions of representation (fictionalizing anthropologists or literary critics), both texts address a central aporia at the heart of the representation of Amerindian populations: how can one represent and to some extent defend the other without exposing him or her to more violence? Kokotovic observes that “even the preservationist cannot help but change Machiguenga culture in the very attempt to preserve it.”²¹ Wormoal in *The Ventriloquist’s Tale* is more than aware of the fact that his “knowledge of the Indians is a way of owning them” (VT 80).

This contradiction between visibility and destruction echoes the relationship of urban people to the space outside of the city as it appears in two important literary traditions that are direct ancestors of Vargas Llosa’s *The Storyteller*. The first one is “las novelas de la selva” (jungle novels), novels that recount a protagonist’s travels into the hinterland. *The Storyteller* quotes the most famous of these: *La vorágine* by J. E. Rivera (1928) (*The Vortex*).²² In a later jungle novel, Alejo Carpentier’s *Los pasos perdidos* (1953) (*The Lost Steps*), we read a clear problematization of the narrator’s voice. *Los pasos perdidos* is both a journal and a retrospective narrative. The first-person narrator recounts his stay in a Venezuelan jungle village depicted as a primitive and idyllic site. The narrator decides at some point to move away from the village for a moment but will never be able to find his way back. The inaccessible utopia returns via the act of writing. But writing, while fixing and preserving his experience of the jungle, also betrays the experience itself: it is the very absence of paper that turned the forest village into a location exempt from the violence of history. The second literary movement referred to in Vargas Llosa’s novel is “indigenismo,” a movement that purported to promote the culture and the life conditions of Indigenous people, mainly from the Andean region. In *Tempestad en los Andes* (1927), the young intellectual Valcárcel had defended the “superioridad de la Raza (sangre y cultura) inca sobre la europea” (superiority of the Inca Race [blood and culture] over the European Race),²³ quoted in Vargas Llosa’s *Utopía* and virulently attacked

all forms of miscegenation. In his numerous conversations with Mascarita, the narrator of *The Storyteller* ironically mocks the young anthropologist's defence of indigenous peoples. The narrator reminds him of the internal contradictions of the indigenist movement:

Eres un indigenista cuadrículado, Mascarita [. . .]. Ni más ni menos que los de los años treinta. Como el Doctor Luis Valcárcel, de joven, cuando pedía que se demolieran todas las iglesias y conventos coloniales porque representaban el Anti-Perú. ¿O sea que tenemos que resucitar el Tahuantinsuyo? ¿También los sacrificios humanos, los quipus, la trepanación de cráneos con cuchillos de piedra? Es gracioso que el último indigenista del Perú sea un judío, Mascarita. (EH 97)

[Narrator] [. . .] "You're an indigenist to the nth degree, Mascarita," I teased him. "Just like the ones in the thirties. Like Dr. Luis E. Valcárcel when he was Young, wanting all the colonial churches and convents demolished because they represented Anti-Peru. Or should we bring back the Tihautinsuyo? Human sacrifice, quipus, trepanation with stone knives? It's a laugh that Peru's last Indigenist turns out to be Jewish, Mascarita." (99)

It is not without irony that Valcárcel's name is mentioned to illustrate Mascarita's radical theses, applied this time not to Andean Indians, the descendants of the Incas, but to the tribes of the Amazon, those for whom the same Valcárcel, after becoming culture minister, signed a cooperation agreement with the Institute of Linguistics of Oklahoma. Vargas Llosa highlights hidden contradictions in the indigenist project that developed in Peru in the late 1920s to 1960s, but also shows how similar issues constituted a central debate for Amazonian regions in the late 1980s. In other words, the two novels respond to literary traditions that are rooted in the avant-garde (*Macunaíma*) and in a contemporary movement (*novelas de la selva*). In the 1980s and 1990s, neoliberalism made all the more obvious the contradiction—if not, aporia—between the necessity to enter modernity to survive and the necessity to escape modernity to preserve one's cultural identity.

This aporia lies at the core of the two novels especially in the way oral myths are embedded in their structures. As Stephanides notes, Melville "wishes to give legibility to the oral tradition and myth"²⁴ and "asserts that certain cultures, especially those that had been colonized in the past, are unrecognizable and unreadable without reference to their oral traditions."²⁵ Even if the central part of her narrative moves away from the magic realist

tone of the prologue and the epilogue, it engages with the heterogeneity of storytelling and myths told in incessant movement and change. The recording of these mythical stories takes into account performance, gesture, and tactile spatial/time elements. *El hablador* alternates between the odd chapters (III, V, and VII), which establish themselves as mythical metadiegetic tales without any identifiable narrator, and the even chapters told from the point of view of the autodiegetic narrator. Mascarita's "conversion" into a "storyteller" is the climax of the novel, something made clear in the very last pages (240–246): the reader understands that the odd myth chapters were told by Mascarita/Zuratas. Central to the narrative structure is accordingly the problem of the retelling/appropriation of the indigenous myths. Many critical studies of *The Storyteller* see it as a failure on Vargas Llosa's part to truly represent indigenous populations as his narrator is more concerned with his own fantasies than the alterity of indigenous cultures. In the first instance, the narrator (Chapters I, II, IV, VI, and VIII), the "hablador" (Chapters III, V, and VII) and Vargas Llosa himself confess to having taken his inspiration from anthropological surveys. Moreover, the narrator admits that his anthropological knowledge comes from Dominican missionaries:

¿Cómo se podría escribir una historia sobre los habladores sin tener un conocimiento siquiera somero de sus creencias, mitos, usos, historia? El convento de los dominicos, en la calle Claudio Coello, me brindó una ayuda utilísima. Conservaban la colección completa de Misiones Dominicanas, órgano de los misioneros de la Orden en el Perú. (EH 102)

(How could I write about storytellers without having at least a superficial knowledge of their beliefs, myths, customs, history? The Dominican monastery in the Calle Claudio Coello gave me invaluable help. It had a complete collection of Misiones Dominicanas, the journal of the missionaries of the Order in Peru. [105])

But, ironically he also acknowledges that he has been unable to read the most important book devoted to Machiguenga culture because the latter was written in German. He himself acknowledges in an interview: "Uno de los libros más importantes que se han escrito sobre los machiguengas es de un antropólogo suizo-alemán, y está publicado en alemán. Eso no podía leerlo, salvo unos resúmenes que aparecieron en una revista," ("One of the most important books about Machiguengas was written by a Swiss German and was published in German. This one I could not read except

for a few abstracts that were published in a journal").²⁶ Secondly, the oral feature of the odd chapters (III, V, and VII) finds its source, following Volek's analysis,²⁷ in Father Joaquín Barriales's *Matsigenka* (1977), in which the Spanish Dominican missionary examines some characteristics of the Machiguenga language. The novel offers the reader enough elements for him or her to understand that the myths told in the odd chapters are not authentic but the result of a scholarly reconstruction. Orality is presented as an object of desire that is already and always lost. Of note is the fact that Vargas Llosa grants an important role to the missionaries in the written-oralized reconstitution of the myths carried out by evangelization missions. Indeed, the novel highlights two main modes of evangelization. The first was carried out unsuccessfully by Catholic missionaries, the "barbados dominicos y esas monjitas españolas [. . .] Pero, a los misioneros se lo está tragando la selva, como al Arturo Cova de *La vorágine*" (EH 94) ("bearded Dominicans and the little Spanish nuns [. . .] But the jungle is swallowing up the missionaries, the way it did Arturo Cova in *The Vortex*" [EHT 96]). Once again, the novel focuses on the question of voicing in this report to the American wilderness. *The Vortex* ends with a famous phrase: "¡Los devoró la selva!" ("the jungle swallowed them"). The protagonists have indeed been "swallowed" by the forest as reported by a final telegram that breaks with the whole story prior to the first person narrator. This movement of absorption is repeated in *El hablador* through the evocation of both Catholic missionaries and Mascarita "swallowed" by the jungle. But the missions of American evangelicals were far more dangerous because they combined spiritual conquest with an intimate knowledge of Indigenous languages and cultures. Zuratas describes their work in very harsh terms:

Ellos son los peores de todos, tus apostólicos lingüistas. Se incrustan en las tribus para destruirlas desde adentro, igualito que los piques. En su espíritu, en sus creencias, en su subconsciencia, en las raíces de su modo de ser. (93–94)

¡Aprender las lenguas aborígenas, vaya estafa ! ¿Para qué ? ¿Para hacer de los indios amazónicos buenos occidentales, buenos hombres modernos, buenos capitalistas, buenos cristianos reformados ? Ni siquiera eso. Sólo para borrar del mapa sus culturas, sus dioses, sus instituciones y adulterarles hasta sus sueños. (95)

Those apostolic linguists of yours are the worst of all. They work their way into the tribes to destroy them from within, just like chiggers.

Into their spirit, their beliefs, their subconscious, the roots of their way of being (95).

“Learn the aboriginal languages!” What a swindle! What for? To make the Amazonian Indians into good Westerners, good modern men, good capitalists, good Christians of the Reformed Church? Not even that. Just to wipe their culture, their gods, their institutions off the map and corrupt even their dreams. (97)

El hablador is wary of anthropologists, above all when they are in fact evangelists. The mission of the Institute of Linguistics (84–85) hosted by the Schneil (who witness the two narrators’ trips into the Machiguenga zone), refers to a reality of the fifties in Peru, the importance of which Vargas Llosa himself stressed in his essay *The Archaic Utopia*.²⁸ The Institute of Linguistics, headed by William P. Townsend (not Peter, as in the novel, 102), “operaba en la selva peruana desde 1945, estudiando las lenguas indígenas”; it is an “organización académico-religiosa vinculada a la Universidad de Oklahoma”²⁹ (“worked in the Peruvian jungle as from 1945, studying aboriginal languages”; it is “an organization of both academics and religious figures related to the University of Oklahoma”).

As these extracts show, the reference to both Catholic and Protestant evangelization reinforces the internal contradiction inherent in Mascarita’s project. On the one hand, he would like to preserve the source of the Machiguenga mythical thought to protect it from the spiritual destruction undertaken by missionaries. However, on the other hand, he reproduces the missionaries’ acts and attitudes, first by letting himself be swallowed by the jungle (like Catholic priests), then by immersing himself in their works to better understand the indigenous language and cosmovision. In this sense, as Luis Hernán Castañeda argues, far from being a celebration of transculturation (Rama), *El hablador* is a “melancholic” story, which ratifies the double loss of the myths in Machiguenga language (translation is betrayal) and their original function and sacred foundation, impossible to recreate in a modern idiom. What remains is an unfathomable longing for another status of the Voice, “crackling, immemorial”³⁰ that resonates, spectrally, in the voice of the narrator.

For other critics like Newmark, Vargas Llosa’s tale can be considered as a “melancholy commentary on narrative impossibility.”³¹ The term “melancholy” recurrently appears in the criticism about Vargas Llosa’s novel, but this term is never accurately or carefully used. Is this really what Kristeva defined as the symptom of radical inhibition and the loss of the ability to use symbols?³² What is its relationship to the different characteristics

of the narrators we have identified? In fact, the narrator does not use the word “melancholy.” On the contrary, he ties up the very act of writing with another sickness of the soul:

Esa misma noche *escribí* a Mascarita [. . .]. Le contaba que había decidido escribir un relato sobre los habladores machiguengas. ¿Me ayudaría? Aquí, en Madrid, acaso por *nostalgia* [. . .], sus ideas ya no me parecían tan disparatadas ni tan irreales. En mi relato, en todo caso, haría el mismo esfuerzo para mostrar la intimidad machiguenga de la manera más auténtica. (102, my emphasis)

That same night I wrote to Mascarita [. . .]. I told him I'd decided to *write* something about Machiguenga storytellers. Would he help me? Here in Madrid, out of *homesickness* perhaps, [. . .] I no longer found his ideas [Zuratas'] as absurd or unrealistic as I once had. In any case, I would try to make my story as authentic and as intimate a portrayal of the Machiguenga way of life as I could. (104, my emphasis)

By (re)constructing an oral performance in written words, the Vargas Llosian narrator adopts a nostalgic attitude expressed in the term “homesickness.” Here rather than melancholy, it is in both cases nostalgia that the narration problematizes.

Nostalgia and Oral Performance

The link between melancholia and literature has been studied for many decades in Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621) or Julia Kristeva's *Soleil noir. Dépression et mélancolie* (1987) (*Black Sun. Depression and Melancholia*) or Paul Gilroy's *Postcolonial Melancholia* (2005) for instance. Nostalgia has received less attention (with the exception of Jankélévitch's brilliant essay *L'irréversible et la nostalgie*, 1974). The fall of the Berlin wall and colonial empires in the 1990s resulted in a renewed scholarly interest in melancholia, which Bolzinger³³ observes, is polymorphous and evolutionary. It has been approached by psychology (see Sedikides et al.'s bibliography³⁴), sociology (see paradigmatic article by Pickering and Keightle³⁵), anthropology (Angé and Berliner³⁶), and most of all by cultural and memory studies (see Chase³⁷ and Shaw, Boym). Less tragic than melancholia, nostalgia seems to have severe radical consequences and cannot easily be apprehended by

storytelling or visual presentation: Dürer did not portray nostalgia; whereas, his famous engraving is dedicated to melancholia. However, as Svetlana Boym's convincing work shows, nostalgia is a concept that allows one to shed new light on a large part of contemporary literature. *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001) explores the relationship between memory, space, and modernity. Even if her privileged corpus is linked with Eastern Europe and Russia, Boym's reflexion on nostalgia as an operative concept in cultural studies can be used to approach postcolonial American literatures in English and Spanish. Starting from Boym's definition is most helpful:

Nostalgia (from *nostos*—return home, and *algia*—longing) is a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy.³⁸

While melancholy operates in the individual sphere, nostalgia refers to a collective frame:

Unlike melancholia, which confines itself to the planes of individual consciousness, nostalgia is about the relationship between individual biography and the biography of groups or nations, between personal and collective memory.³⁹

In this sense, the two narrators seem to be consumed by nostalgia as described by Boym. According to this definition, in fact, nostalgia is a “historical emotion” symptom of our age that emerged with the advent of modernity and the transformation that it has engendered in terms of time and space, of the local and the universal:

What is crucial is that nostalgia was not merely an expression of local longing, but a result of a new understanding of time and space that made the division into “local” and “universal” possible. The nostalgic creature has internalized this division, but instead of aspiring for the universal and the progressive he looks backward and yearns for the particular.⁴⁰

In the works under consideration, the *Nostos*, for which the narrators long or yearn, is less a geographical place than a narrative mode, a way of telling which recovers both the oral and the mythical background of indigenous cultures. The relationship with the *Nostos* is marked by the persistence of

algia: the longing. In this sense, nostalgia is more active than it seems. To what extent does this active nostalgia animate the recreation of indigenous cosmogonies in both novels? To answer this question, Boym makes a most relevant distinction:

Restorative nostalgia stresses *nostos* and attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home. Reflective nostalgia thrives in *algia*, the longing itself, and delays the homecoming—wistfully, ironically, desperately. Restorative nostalgia does not think of itself as nostalgia, but rather as truth and tradition. Reflective nostalgia dwells on the ambivalences of human longing and belonging.⁴¹

Boym associates restorative nostalgia with a return to origins and the reconstruction of emblems. Reflective nostalgia, which can be ironic and humorous, by contrast, “explores ways of inhabiting many places at once” and “cherishes shattered fragments of memory and demoralizes space.”⁴² This distinction, which we will not consider as dichotomous but in a dialectic dynamic movement, will help us shed light on the scope of two stories marked by loss and the desire to return, via narrative performance, to the immemorial place of myth.

In Vargas Llosa’s novel, the narrative impulse destabilizes the narrative architecture and makes it much less Manichean than one might imagine on a first reading. From this perspective, the narrator, however, strongly in favor of the economic exploitation of the jungle and the acculturation of the Indians (very close to the neoliberalism advocated by the author himself), is really obsessed with the figure of “the storyteller.” In extremis, the reader realizes that the magnetization power of the word transcends the boundaries between languages and cultures while forming their singularity:

—¿Qué es lo que tanto te llama la atención ? ¿Qué tienen de particular los habladores ?

En efecto, ¿por qué no podía quitármelos de la cabeza, desde esa noche ?

—Son una prueba palpable de que contar historias puede ser algo más que una mera diversión—se me ocurrió decirle—. Algo primordial, algo de lo que depende la existencia misma de un pueblo. (EH 92)

“What is it you find so fascinating? What’s so special about habladores?”

A good question. Why hadn't I been able to get them out of my mind since that night?

"They're a tangible proof that storytelling can be something more than mere entertainment," it occurred to me to say to him. "Something primordial, something that the very existence of a people may depend on." (EHT 94)

Storytelling, Vargas Llosa reminds us with Benjaminian overtones, is a shared primordial experience that has been eclipsed by secular modernity. In a nostalgic fashion, the narrator of the legends chapters in *The Storyteller* would like to restore the mythological background of the indigenous tribes to preserve it. This nostalgia emerges as static and involves exclusionary elements. As noted, Chapters III, V, and VII are (inauthentic) recreations of Machiguenga myths by a narrator who speaks (from Italy) for another (*el hablador/mascarita*), who is the voice of communities scattered throughout the novel. The narrator seems to want to restore Machiguenga myths in their spontaneous emergence, in speech that is supposed to reproduce oral phrases and verbal interlocution: "En mi relato, en todo caso, haría el mismo esfuerzo para mostrar la intimidad machiguenga de la manera más auténtica" (EH 102) ("In any case, I would *try* to make my story as *authentic* and as intimate a portrayal of the Machiguenga way of life as I could" [104]). This way of reconstructing the verbal world of an isolated community is typical of a restorative fiction: a fiction that wants to recreate what no longer exists from a perspective typical of restorative nostalgia. Inevitably, the myths recreated nostalgically are filled with the narrator's sources: not only the ones of the missionaries but also the myths of the storyteller himself. Machiguenga tales, like Wapisiana mythical cosmogonies, are foregrounded as intertextual and dynamic constructs. In several ways, Vargas Llosa's storyteller, who is trying to gather the stories of the Machiguengas, emerges as a transcultural figure. Yet, he fails to acknowledge that his recounting of indigenous stories is mixed with the resurgence of his own culture, which, to some extent, limits his own project. As Peter Standish highlights, "in the *hablador* sections there are numerous assimilations of Jewish and Christian myths to Machiguenga ones, or vice-versa."⁴³ Moreover, traces of modern Western literature can be observed, as in the following extract: "Yo era gente. Yo tenía familia. Yo estaba durmiendo. Y en eso me desperté. Apenas abrí los ojos comprendí ¡ay, Tasurinchi! Me había convertido en insecto, pues. Una chicharra-machacuy, tal vez. Tasurinchi-Gregorio era" (EH 196) ("I was people. I had a family. I was asleep. Then I woke up. I'd barely opened my eyes when I understood. Alas, poor Tasurinchi! I'd changed into an insect, that's what. A buzz-buzz

bug, perhaps. A Gregor-Tasurinchi" [203]). Kokotovic observes in this extract a trace of "Zurata's favourite Kafka story," thereby revealing how his tale is "structured by a hierarchical relationship in which the indigenous narrative is both subordinate to and a product of the Western one."⁴⁴ These dynamic comparisons and borrowings reveal the porosity and flux between these modes of seeing and narrating reality.

Central to both novels is the question of the return. Doctors in the seventeenth century thought that nostalgia was a disease that could be cured by going back to the place you were longing for. Neither the narrator nor el *hablador* go back to Lima: the first remains in Italy and the second in the jungle. From a distance, the narrator hears the "immemorial" voice (last phrase) and transforms it in its ventriloquist's tale that works as a reflective nostalgia, which emphasizes "the longing itself, and delays the homecoming—[. . .] ironically."⁴⁵ In Boym's language, it could be a way of ironizing restorative nostalgia, making it productive, that is, attempting to convert it into reflective nostalgia. The end of the novel thus highlights the tension between restorative and reflective nostalgia. Even though the first form is dominant, for which the author was blamed: Kokotovic saw the nostalgia of the indigenous world destroyed by an "imperialist nostalgia,"⁴⁶ in line with Vargas Llosa's politically conservative program during the presidential elections of 1990. That program acknowledges that it is impossible to return home.

Such ambivalence is not present in Melville's novel. If we take into account the characters' trajectories, we can feel the strong presence of nostalgia at the beginning of the novel. Marietta does not feel happy because she does not live with her parents, as is usual in their community (Chapter 1). When Chofy goes to Georgetown, he feels lost. The city is like a labyrinth and the temporal compartmentalizations destabilize him (Chapter 2). But he rapidly changes his mind, thanks to the encounter with Rosa. Chofy wants to live without nostalgia, but it is impossible. All characters, except Beatrice, go back home: even Father Napier and McKinnon return to England. This is significantly different from *The Storyteller*. Nostalgia is even inscribed on Beatrice's body, with "the silent silver stream of the river between her legs [which] carried in it the reflections of clouds and a flight of macaws" (VT 280). Yet, at the end of the novel, the trip back home takes place in mourning circumstances, indicating that nostalgia has been supplanted. Bla-Bla, Chofy's son, is dead: "With shock, he [Chofy] felt that he had lost not only a child but a whole continent" (VT 345). The loss of place is related to the loss of the young boy, whom his mother wants to bury in their homeland. However, the last chapter of the novel moves away from restorative

nostalgia: the couple and Auntie Wifreda begin step by step to rebuild their lives, bringing together fragments of their Amerindian culture epitomized in Bla-Bla being buried in his hammock with his bow and arrows but also riding horses “doubled up with laughter” (VT 350). A symbolic gesture by Wifreda shows her liberation from the past: she burns Father Napier’s diaries and Waugh’s book. It is not possible to restore the past, it is not worth being trapped in it. Present life is better. As DeLoughrey highlights “By embedding her narrative of incest in the histories of South American mythology as well as incorporating theories of relativity and quantum physics, Melville highlights indigenous science and removes the Amerindian hinterland from the temporal division of space that arises from a diasporic nostalgia for origins.”⁴⁷ Both the prologue and the epilogue convey a very vital sensation, which is very far from nostalgia. But at the same time, the narrative gesture is nostalgic: the narrator wants to write the legacy of an oral tradition that is vanishing. When she adopts realism in the central section of *The Ventriloquist’s Tale*, Melville seems to acknowledge her failure or inability to speak as an insider of orality. This failure echoes Melville’s own failure when she attempted to record Wapisiana language, an experience she unveils in “The Wapichan Dictionary”: after a random process of collection, the “problem of pinning down the language on paper,”⁴⁸ the dictionaries remained untouched.

In other words, the ventriloquist and the *hablador* are invisible narrators who express their identity in a *performance*, the act of storytelling, an act we cannot see but only imagine from a photograph (in *The Storyteller*) and from the prologue (in *The Ventriloquist’s Tale*). The roots of the performance are linked with social marginalization symbolized by the birthmark for Zuratas and incest for Chico, and both are linked with darkness (eclipse). These are experiences that trigger, according to Vargas Llosa, the real inner driving force behind the act of writing. The instinctual oral dimension becomes predominant in the course of the story for both metadiegetical narrators, Chico and Zuratas, but this dimension is also important for the narrators in both novels. The love affair with Chofy allows the discovery of the Wapisiana world for Rosa, and the importance of narration as an act echoes the concerns of the authorial figures. Still, Melville’s central parroting metaphor conveys her own status via a sort of *mise en abyme* in the ironic and humorous voice of the ventriloquist. Maybe nostalgia can be situated at the level of orality, which the ventriloquist incarnates, but also remains inaccessible and reveals the “untranslatability of language and culture,”⁴⁹ of orality. Yet, “as a ventriloquist who merely repeats a story, the narrator’s tale loses any association with authenticity and nostalgia nativism.”⁵⁰ In both liminal texts, this peculiar narrator identifies with the parrot, just like the *hablador*. Could it be seen

as a nostalgic symbol in both novels? Andrade's famous *Macunaima* story is told from the point of view of the parrot "in the silence of Uraricoera only the parrot had rescued from oblivion those happenings, and the language that had disappeared."⁵¹ In Melville's prologue and epilogue, the narrator seems to accept technological modernity without inhibitions, but insists on his debt to the oral tradition embodied in his grandmother's voice and the figure of the parrot. The ventriloquist's sublime talent is to "reproduce perfectly the mating call of every bird and beast in the Amazonas" (VT 7). His introductory note is the first of a large number of references in the novel to the fact that, in Wapisiana culture, animals "are ventriloquists too" (VT 200). Throughout the main narrative, Marietta keeps looking for the parrot, her favourite (VT 316), who had gone missing. It is the young child Bla-Bla, who also "imagined fences around the village to keep intruders away" (VT 318), and who, before dying, "talked to a man he could see in the corner of the room, who had a parrot sitting on his shoulder" (VT 344). In the epilogue, this parrot is still the alter ego of the narrator, but this one has become sick, with a cancerous cyst in the neck, the region that protects the throat, which is the location of the organ of voice. The link between parrot and storytelling was already at the center of Melville's short story "The Parrot and Descartes" which tells the story of the encounter between Descartes and a parrot and how from then on magic and technology went "their separate ways."⁵² "The parrot, a natural representative of the oral tradition"⁵³ and mediator, as the story puts it, is also portrayed as sobbing and homesick. Kathleen William Renk reads this image of the parrot, as "a representative of the universal unconscious"⁵⁴ but mostly as the resistant voice of the colonized world. The playful narrator of *The Ventriloquist's Tale* is also attached to a parrot, but one he cannot find anymore and who eventually, as nostalgically expressed in the epilogue, "has lost its feathers and has a big tumour on its neck" (VT 357). In his desperate search for a missing parrot, the narrator decides to hide and retreat to the stars. The reference to the lost feathers allows one to read this ending in a more nuanced way. Traditionally, feathers are the symbols of the communication between heaven and earth. Chevalier and Gheerbrant point out that it is very much the case in communities in which the shamanic function is important: "The symbolic function of the feather is linked, in shamanism, with rituals of heavenly ascent and thus vision and divination."⁵⁵ And as Barozzo further indicates, the hopefulness of Bla-Bla is transferred onto the parrot, which, via the art of ventriloquy, will persist.

In *The Storyteller*, the parrot is also presented as an *alter ego* of Mascarita and is also marked by a deficiency: it has a deformed wing. The narrator emits a sound like a parrot that repeats and transforms his voice. Chapter VII, the

last one to evoke machiguengas myths, ends with an auto-description of the narrator with his parrot that “has got a game leg and limbs” (EHT 233). The narrator calls him with a name the parrot keeps repeating: “lo llamo con una palabra que inventé para él. Un ruido de loros, pues. A ver, imítenlo. Despertémoslo, llamémoslo. Él lo aprendió y lo repite muy bien: Mas-ca-rita, Mas-ca-rita, Mas-ca-rita” (EH 224) (“I call him by a name I invented for him. A parrot noise. Let’s hear you imitate it. Let’s wake him up; let’s call him. He’s learned it and repeats it very well: Mas-ca-rita, Mas-ca-rita, Mas-ca-rita” [EHT 234]).

In Vargas Llosa, the parrot is the symbol of the hablador because it was born imperfect like him. He “is the symbol which heralded his destiny” moving “from the margins of one society to the focal point of another.”⁵⁶ The lost feathers in Melville and the incapacity to fly in Vargas Llosa exposes a parrot that is unable to fit with its traditional and symbolic role as celestial messenger: Chevalier and Gheerbrant remind one that the feather is “symbole d’une puissance aérienne, libérée des pesanteurs de ce monde” (“symbol of air power, freed of the burdens of this world”⁵⁷). Following Spivak’s observations that the subaltern cannot speak, Barozotto and Bonnici highlight that “the native is capable of retort.”⁵⁸ In his insightful study of *The Ventriloquist’s Tale* from a Brazilian point of view, Barzotto draws our attention to the character of the grandmother Koko Lupi who “distrusts writing” which embodies fabrication and truth and as she maintains “variety being so much more important than truth” (VT 3). Koko Lupi, who later helps Beatrice poison Father Napier with magical toxic jams, and “represents the tribe’s oral tradition,”⁵⁹ is infuriated when the narrator tells her he is going to write the stories down (VT 8). Koko Lupi is the one who advocates sticking to one’s culture; even if the narrator at the very end decides “you know you can’t trust grandmothers—they’re full of all that crap” (VT 357), she ultimately remains the spectral and invigorating voice of orality, of which the performance, gesture and wit of the narrator is reminiscent. The epilogue, although it “ends with the chilling effects of global modernity,”⁶⁰ is then antinostalgic as it expresses the will to go through mourning after the loss of aura: the parrot does not fly up any more but does not relinquish speaking altogether. And as Barzotto makes clear, “narration is a form of power. Expanding the collective beyond the imprisonment of common sense and democratizing in literature is also a form of power.”⁶¹

In his famous “The Storyteller” essay quoted in the epigraph, Walter Benjamin condemns the rise of modern information, which has led to the decline of storytelling, a form of communication that enables the actual integration of community-based experience and wisdom. In his critique of

Benjamin's approach, which he considers "nostalgic modernism," Timothy Brennan highlights the power of the novels of the contemporary third world, whose major characteristics contradict many of Benjamin's accounts.⁶² In this respect, one can argue that Vargas Llosa's and more importantly Melville's novel contradict three elements Brennan foregrounds. They both insist on the preservation of memory, moralize recent local history and refuse the plausibility aspect of the novel by using magic realism.⁶³ Melville's novel and Vargas Llosa's magic realist sections offer a syncretic voice that does not separate two radically different modes of seeing reality. Benjamin was not entirely wrong in asserting the loss of orality, but as Bate argues, "the danger lies in what we do with the nostalgia,"⁶⁴ whether it prevents one from moving forward or triggers regeneration. Although parts of Vargas Llosa portray a world where the spiritual and the physical coexist (in certain sections), avoiding epistemic dichotomies, one must highlight the nostalgic rational and written frame of the novel. Melville's entire text, by contrast, even her apparently realist narrative, moves beyond the usual spatio-temporal boundaries and episteme. Wapisiana, Taruma, Wai Wai, and Macusi myths are presented as embodying natural rhythms that actively and surreptitiously participate in daily life and conversations, constantly engaging with orality, collectivity and the voice of (in)animate nature via her engagement with the sonic and tactile dimension of collective experience and memorization, among others. The connection with the latter, via petroglyphs or the bones of the past, allows for a connection not with primeval nature but first and foremost with collectivity. Melville's character's exclamation that "We're destroyed if we mix. We're destroyed if we don't" (VT 55) might not entirely capture the current problem after all. The issue the novel more fundamentally uncovers is how the individual establishes a relationship with collectivity via orality because collectivity is the first step towards a new relationship with the world. By contrast, Vargas Llosa emphasizes the individual character of writing and its metamorphoses: it's the writer strolling "en los puentes de piedras ocres sobre el Arno" (EH 235) ("on the ochre stone bridges over the Arno" [EHT 245]) which becomes the receptacle of the storyteller's immemorial voice. The last sentence of the novel reads as follows: "seguiré oyendo, cercano, sin pausas, crepitante, inmemorial, a ese hablador machiguenga" (EH 235) ("I would still hear, close by, unceasing, crackling, immemorial, that Machiguenga storyteller" [EHT 246]). This last sentence of the Peruvian novel foregrounds the productive character of reflective nostalgia: it is the narrator's careful act of listening to this immemorial voice that is the source of a type of writing that is remote from the indigenous world which remains paradoxically fascinating for the intellectual narrator in Italy. Nostalgia,

although also present in Melville's novel, is less present at the level of structure. The natural rhythms that accompany Bla-Bla's mourning at the end bring Chofy and his wife away from the past to project them into the future, an unknown future but one that is anchored in collectivity and detached from any metaliterary dimension. This ending reveals how reflective nostalgia, which is interspersed with restorative elements, can help maintain a historical continuity while remaining in complex movement.

The different contexts of the publications can perhaps explain the differences in the nature of nostalgia in both novels. As Oscar Espinosa de Rivero points out, the struggles of indigenous Amazonian populations, when compared to those of indigenous populations on the Peruvian coast, are not restricted to land claims. They are also very concerned with ethnic identity.⁶⁵ These longstanding claims, denied by both the Spanish colonial power and the Peruvian state that organized the colonization of the Amazonians right after independence, were revived in the 1960s. However, it is only in the 1990s that these claims became visible. Indigenous communities started calling for alternative development models that are not centered on progress but towards "buen vivir,"⁶⁶ a harmonious relationship between humans and nature. Melville's novel, published in 1997, is obviously more representative of a greater visibility of the indigenous' voice and vision in contact with Western urban cultures. It ends with an opening, a projection beyond mourning and loss, which the author, although very nostalgic herself, has been able to understand and convey in her creative text.

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Notes

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