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# Mario Vargas Llosa's *La señorita de Tacna*: Autobiography and/as Theater

Autobiography: an account of a subject's life as told by the subject.<sup>1</sup> Theater: a dramatic performance which reenacts an event, real or imagined. Expressed in this manner it is apparent that Mario Vargas Llosa's *La señorita de Tacna*, performed and published in 1981, is both. It is theater which examines the manner in which we create fictions and tell stories, while simultaneously it posits itself as autobiography, repetition, and yet, paradoxically, fiction. Concurrently, it is autobiography which recognizes itself as theater, *mise en scène*, dramatic re-creation, for we watch the memories (fantasies) of both Mamaé and Belisario take shape in the form of plays within the play. Thus, as both metatheater and metafiction, *La señorita de Tacna* marks and illustrates the bridge between fiction and theater—two genres often thought to be mutually exclusive—and the text, not unlike autobiography, signals the fusion of reality (life) and fantasy (literature).

*La señorita de Tacna* is principally the story of Mamaé's life as told to Belisario and then recounted to the latter's imagined reader as we listen in. In this respect, then, Mamaé is the autobiographer whose tale is interpreted by Belisario, her biographer and simultaneously his own autobiographer. The play not only reenacts some of the events in Mamaé's life, but it also dramatizes her narrating of those moments to Belisario and in turn his endeavors to re-create it all for the imagined reader. By thus redoubling the "autobiographers" (Mamaé and Belisario), Vargas Llosa has also redoubled the metaphoric readers or public in a way that makes us a part of the play. We watch Belisario listening to and interpreting Mamaé's life in a mirror reflection of our own activities. In this respect *La señorita de Tacna* is a *mise en scène* of the acts of reading and writing autobiography.<sup>2</sup>

In spite of its obvious status as theater, then, *La señorita de Tacna* follows the general structural outlines of autobiography, a genre which traces the life of its protagonist from birth to death (or near death). The Vargas Llosa play opens in darkness, in a metaphoric pre-birth ("El escenario está a oscuras," p. 21), which is followed by a cataclysm of water ("Los ríos, salen los ríos... El agua, la espuma, los globitos, la lluvia lo está empapando todo, se vienen las olas, se está chorreando el mundo, la inundación, se pasa el auga, se sale, se escapa"). This gushing of water might easily be understood as a poetic, symbolic birth, which

in turn is followed by light ("El escenario se ilumina del todo"). In other words, in a visual, acoustic, and poetic sense, Mamaé has been born (se la ha dado a luz). Clearly, autobiography too begins with the same historical event, the birth of the protagonist, a moment which also signals the genesis of writing or story telling, in the concrete sense that the autobiographer is born and in the sense that the writing or story has begun. What may be particularly significant about the opening of the play and what again ties it directly to autobiography is the fact that both begin within the fictional mode, within the *énoncé*, and then later move out of the fiction presented as such to consider the act of creation. In the case of *La señorita de Tacna*, we step ahead from the *énoncé*, which takes place in 1950, to the moment of the *énonciation* in 1980 when Belisario is composing. However, as is also the case in autobiography, the *énonciation* here has paradoxically already been converted into *énoncé* (in this case theater); that is, the telling of the tale (the *énonciation*, which here is already theater) has become a part of the tale (*énoncé*). In this particular case, the dramatization of the creative act provides the frame play for the plays within the play. Similarly, any autobiographer who is to tell all of his life must include his present and concurrent act of writing since as an autobiographer that is what he is—a writer, a teller of tales—and both Belisario and Mamaé are overtly presented as such. Like Belisario, the autobiographer too often shares with his reader the problems of creation.

At the same time, because of its nature, autobiography is a genre inevitably marked by a series of dyadic oppositions. The *I*/writer in the present tense is necessarily placed in opposition to the *I*/actor of the past tense (in something of a reverse mirror reflection—not identical to the object but certainly interdependent), while the function of the text, that is the search via language, is to discover how the past *I* developed into the present *I*. *La señorita de Tacna* dramatically presents this process in the character of Belisario who tries to write, to make sense of his life and the lives of others. The point is made visually in Belisario's physical movement between the two settings on the stage (past and present). He slips from his position at his desk and his role as mature writer to the other part of the stage where he becomes an actor, the child in the tale he tells, just as Mamaé converts from the ancient story teller to the young woman of her stories. In this respect the play defines autobiography in concrete, visual terms as two poles, separated and distanced by time and space. The writer/autobiographer's job is to fill in the space between these two poles with words, thus bridging and uniting the two, as he discovers or invents a unity and continuity between them.

Nevertheless, the Vargas Llosa work adds yet one more level to the audience's psychological oscillation and emphasizes the person on the stage as both actor *and* character. This quality, which is no doubt a con-

stant in drama, is highlighted in *La señorita de Tacna* when Belisario, who is acting the role of priest, confessor of Mamaé in the play within the play, steps back from his part to his character of Belisario to ask Mamaé if “¿La pata de Judas era yo, Mamaé?” (p. 97). By underlining his multiple roles, the work presents itself as metatheater, and we are continually called upon, as is the dramatized writer, Belisario, to try to reconcile the fictions and the realities, person and role, signifier and referent. Again, there can be little doubt that the pseudogoal of autobiography is the reconciliation of these seeming antitheses.

In *La señorita de Tacna* we encounter a series of dyadic oppositions on multiple levels. First, a number of characters simultaneously mirror and contrast each other as well as themselves. For example, in photographic terms Mamaé provides both a positive and a negative image for Belisario in that she too is a story teller, weaver of fantasy (positive image) while she models what he may well become—the mere shell of a person encased within her own fantasies (negative image). She also mirrors and on some level becomes interchangeable with (metaphorically at least) la Abuela, to the extent that she takes on many of the latter’s motherly duties and at one moment apparently even wishes to replace her in the heart (or bed) of el Abuelo. Similarly, she and Carlota are ostensibly interchangeable in the affections of Joaquín. Even Mamaé herself (like Belisario) is presented as a dual reflection in her split role as the young Elvira and the elderly Mamaé, for she metamorphoses from one to the other before the very eyes of the audience. In this respect, Mamaé metaphorically embodies the concept of autobiography since she is both then and now, *I* and *she*, the teller and the tale, narrator and actor, Mamaé and la señorita de Tacna, truth and fantasy, while the goal of her story telling, like that of any autobiographer, is to bridge this gap, fill in the temporal and physical space between the young, beautiful Elvira and the old, decrepit Mamaé.

At the same time, Mamaé is a metaphor for fiction itself. She has no proper name; Mamaé merely denotes her function as substitute mother (Mamá Elvira, “una Mamá sin serlo,” p. 121), substitute life-giver (creator?), and by implication, creator of a substitute life. For Belisario she is but a vague memory, already a fiction which he embellishes and further fictionalizes. And, most importantly, she is the story teller, the weaver of tales<sup>3</sup> that stimulated the young Belisario’s imagination, that is the “mother”, creator of the Belisario we watch invent his own fictions, his own tales.

In this manner and also in the style of autobiography *La señorita de Tacna* is a curious mixture of poetry and blatant, unabashed realism. The very poetic, literary opening of the play with its metaphoric rivers is immediately denigrated on two levels. First, within the *énoncé*, Amelia enters to reproach Mamaé for having urinated in the living room

again—surely a far cry from the poetic rivers we had imagined. Then on the level of dramatized *énonciation* Belisario not only negates the poetry but further breaks the fictional spell with “¿Qué vienes a hacer tú en una historia de amor, Mamaé? ¿Qué puede hacer una viejecita que se orinaba y se hacía caca en los calzones . . . en una historia de amor, Belisario?” (pp. 22–23). Thus, we are immediately forced to recognize the triple nature of the fictional endeavor as well as to acknowledge the creation of the fantasy, the poetry. The “real event” (if indeed one ever existed) is poetized and glorified as it passes through the consciousness of Mamaé; it is turned into fiction, but it is a fiction of romanticism,<sup>4</sup> which she narrates to Belisario. He in turn attempts to “read,” analyze, and then renarrate these same events (like any biographer or autobiographer) in what he hopes is a more realistic vein, while recognizing that he too is creating fiction. Thus, several times removed from the event or referent (which again may well be imaginary), we are afforded the opportunity to observe as this event takes the shape of fiction, as Vargas Llosa demonstrates that language can never express more than partial truths and partial lies.

This characteristic, that is language’s ability to simultaneously tell the truth and lie as it necessarily encompasses only half truths and half lies, is dramatized in the play at several points. We watch as the characters say one thing and do (or mean) another. For example, early in the first reenactment of Mamaé’s youth, Joaquín appears at her window, and the text notes that she, as any well-bred young lady of the nineteenth century, “se incorpora . . . alborozada, modosa, reticente” and admonishes him, “¿Cómo se te ocurre venir a estas horas, Joaquín! ¿No te ha visto nadie? Vas a arruinar mi reputación” (p. 25). Significantly, however, the previous stage directions indicated that when she first hears him at her window, “sonríe con *malicia*, mira a todos lados azorada” (p. 25, my emphasis). Thus, language creates a variety of roles and then is used to cover some of them. Which is truth and which is fiction we are never to know. Similarly the play suggests that the relationship between Mamaé and Joaquín, which appeared to be valid, was perhaps just more playacting on the part of Joaquín, as was Mamaé’s role of *mírame pero no me toques*.

Belisario, however, not unlike most of us, objects to the mixture of truth and fantasy. He recognizes that he is creating fiction and protests when the aged “reality” of Mamaé intrudes into his fantasy world. Indeed, perhaps one of the most repeated criticisms of the Vargas Llosa play is that the playwright has mixed so many semblances of reality/fantasy, and we as public have difficulty sorting through them and categorizing them.<sup>5</sup> Clearly, the point of the play is just that: these aspects cannot be neatly categorized and placed in suitable hierarchies. Again this mixture of truth and fantasy is a necessary product of

language as is repeatedly dramatized throughout the text when all interpretations of events become equally suspect. We know that we cannot accept Mamaé's tale about the Indian girl in Camaná literally, for she tells Belisario that el Abuelo "le había pegado a una sirvienta" (p. 134, my emphasis), when in fact el Abuelo had made love to her.<sup>6</sup> The verisimilitude of the tale is further complicated by el Abuelo's letter to his wife to tell of the incident (due to what motivations we do not know) and his insistence that not only was it not his fault, but that he did it thinking of her, la Abuela, that is, projecting his image of her onto the servant, i.e. adding another layer of fiction. Yet another level is added by the fact that Mamaé reads this letter (this autobiographic literature within the literature) and as a result notes, referring to herself in the third person (another gesture related to autobiography), "Le temblaba el cuerpo. . . . La carta era tan, tan explícita que le parecía estar sintiendo esos golpes [sic] que el caballero le daba a la mujer mala" (p. 135).

Thus, by means of the autobiographic literature, the public (in this case Mamaé) projects itself into the role and relives it vicariously by means of the reading. And, Mamaé stresses the fact that her reaction to the written text was stronger than it might otherwise have been, "Porque ella conocía al autor de la carta" (p. 134); such, of course, is also the case with autobiography which by definition is not anonymous literature. As Vargas Llosa demonstrates, autobiography is a literary form which not only serves to reify the projections of the author and allow him to discover how he came to have the role he plays, but it also allows the public to share that role as it projects itself into that role and thus develops empathy for the author (perhaps one of the principal objectives of autobiography). Unquestionably, this entire concept of vicarious projection into the fiction of others is particularly well dramatized in *La señorita de Tacna* via the character of Mamaé. Although on one level, Mamaé is surely the autobiographer, she has always lived her life through others, vicariously. She is the señorita de Tacna, but she speaks of herself as if she were other. She has lived all through la Abuela, sharing her children and el Abuelo. And, significantly and doubtlessly as a result, she is the story teller, narrating rather than living, for ultimately it is Belisario who must reiterate her story to us. It would seem then that only Belisario, self-conscious writer, can organize Mamaé's story into literary form, which may be precisely what happens in the autobiographic genre. Mamaé's stories are oral tales, apparently without rhyme, reason, nor objective. Belisario shapes them into literature. If we accept that Mamaé and Belisario are mirror reflections (although certainly distorted) and/or projections of each other), then surely Belisario represents the writer alter ego of Mamaé, just as the writer/autobiographer is merely an alter ego, projection, surrogate of the person in the world.

Nevertheless, at the same time, the Vargas Llosa work demonstrates that while these projections are apparently inevitable, it is equally inescapable that we do not recognize them as such, perhaps in much the same way as we often fail to recognize that the autobiographer is a surrogate of the man in the world even as he projects the "character" (in both senses of the word) of whom he writes. The internal play of act one ends with Mamaé shouting, "Soñé que mi novio trataba de tocarme los pechos, ñatita. ¡Estos chilenos tan atrevidos! ¡Hasta en el sueño hacen indecencias!" (p. 82). What is significant is that she apparently does not recognize that "estos chilenos" are her, her own creation, and the indecency to which she refers is within her. Similarly, Belisario, in the frame play, falls asleep at the end of act one, suggesting that the entire play is his dream, his projection, as of course it is.

Similarly, another obvious characteristic which *La señorita de Tacna* shares with autobiography is the fact that the work is a dialog with itself. Again, this is demonstrated in very concrete terms in the play. Near the beginning of the work, the stage directions note that Belisario "mueve los labios como si se dictara a sí mismo" (pp. 21-22). The next set of instructions notes, "Habla para sí" (p. 22). Even more significant is the fact that his interior dialog is first directed toward Mamaé, "¿Qué vienes a hacer tú en una historia de amor, Mamaé?" (p. 22) and then to himself, "¿Qué puede hacer una viejecita . . . en una historia de amor, Belisario?" Thus, the interlocutors are interchangeable but ultimately are only he, himself since as has been suggested Mamaé is but a projection of himself, his own alter ego just as the character of any autobiography is necessarily an alter ego of the autobiographer. The difference is that Vargas Llosa forces us to recognize this aspect, first because the work is a play and not a narrative and secondly because Mamaé is of a different sex and a different generation. For these reasons, we are never allowed to confuse the creator and the created as we so often erroneously do in autobiography.

Interesting, too, is the fact that on yet another level Mamaé also dramatizes a model of the autobiographer, for the stage directions indicate that she too "Ha comenzado hablándole a Belisario pero se ha distraído y ahora está hablándose a sí misma" (p. 112). Surely, this is what any autobiographer does: he begins telling his reader or listener but ends up telling himself, as he probes his own past and tries to find the truth within it to explain it to himself as he asks the questions of how he came to be. "Para que lo hiciera sentirse un inútil y vivir tan angustiado que un día le estalló la cabeza y se olvidó de donde estaba su casa . . ." (p. 112) is a question Mamaé asks of herself (the projected creator of this fiction) but ostensibly also asks of God (the master playwright). Thus, in a direct parallel of the project of autobiography, Mamaé looks for cause and effect, why things are as they are.

Perhaps, however, it is in the setting, that is, in the physical, visual aspects of *La señorita de Tacna* that the autobiographic nature of the work is most apparent and most meaningful. To begin with, the stage setting itself underlines the bidirectional nature of autobiography—now/then, subject/object, etc. to which I have referred. The stage is divided into two: “Dos decorados comparten el escenario: *la casa de los Abuelos*, en la Lima de los años cincuenta, y el *cuarto de trabajo de Belisario*, situado en cualquier parte del mundo, en el año 1980” (p. 15). The scenic directions then go on to specify that the grandparents’ house “no debería ser realista. Es un decorado recordado por Belisario, un producto de la memoria.” In direct contrast, since the stage directions do not make it clear that Belisario’s study is also fantasy, it presumably should be realistic. In this sense then, the fictional world as presented on stage is concretely and visually divided into two: now/then, here/there, supposed reality/supposed fiction. The fact that both settings ultimately share the same stage and function on the same level as in autobiography clearly points to the theme that the present “reality” is equally as fictitious as what we would tend to accept as fiction, fantasy, mental invention.

It is significant, too, that both settings center on chairs, which, although they are very different types of chairs, become meaningful semiotic points of reference. As the stage setting notes, “Los muebles *imprescindibles* son el viejo sillón donde la Mamaé ha pasado buena parte de sus últimos años, la sillita de madera que le sirve de bastón, . . . ” (p. 15, my emphasis). To tell her stories, Mamaé always settles into her *sillón*, the locus of literature, the center for the *mise en scène* of her tales, while the young Belisario, the captive audience, sits at her feet, taking in every word, trying to formulate the significance behind the words, trying to see, as it were, beyond those words. In a parallel fashion, and in what I would call the present of the *énonciation* were we talking about fiction or autobiography *per se*, Belisario sits in his chair at his typewriter in order to re-create these tales, and we, the audience, also find ourselves, in a very real physical position, at his feet as we too listen attentively and try to find the hidden meaning behind the words. At the same time the chair represents the locus of age, for “La Mamaé regresa hacia su sillón y en el trayecto va recuperando su ancianidad” (p. 31). Later, when she leaves her chair (p. 49), she becomes young again. But, telling tales in her *sillón* (i.e. the autobiographic gesture) brings the young Belisario to her feet and on some level, by returning her to her youth (metaphorically at least), becomes, like literature in general but autobiography in specific, a form of fighting or denying age. Significantly, neither is Belisario young when he sits in his chair and creates: “Belisario puede andar entre los cuarenta o cincuenta años, o ser incluso mayor” (p. 16), but he too rejuvenates as he leaves his chair and enters



his fantasies, his story telling. In both cases, there is the subtle but visual message that creating fictions (either orally or in writing) and/or reading and hearing those fictions is something to be done in a seated, passive position—significantly, a position which negates life as surely as it denies or prescinds other activity. While Mamaé and Belisario are telling, they are not living. The chairs are loci of mental activity but physical inactivity. As Eduardo Pavlovsky notes in *La mueca*, “los espectadores sensibles están siempre sentados en sillones demasiado cómodos, demasiado inmóviles para ver la realidad.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, Mamaé creates stories, fictions, not an independent, meaningful life for herself. She is the substitute mother whose metaphorical children are her stories. The chairs mark the location of substitution, withdrawal from the continuum of life and “reality,” the creation of fictions.<sup>8</sup>

At the same time, however, there is a third, all-important chair: the wooden *sillita* which Mamaé uses as a support for walking. Thus, the large chair is the center of literature (specifically autobiography) and escape from reality while the small chair provides her with some access to that same reality, suggesting that literature too does both. The act of narrating affords us the escape we need in order to continue to function within the reality, or as Vargas Llosa expresses it in the prologue to *La señorita de Tacna*, “es . . . una actividad primordial . . . una manera de sobrellevar la vida” (p. 9).

Similarly, just as Mamaé is the substitute mother, Belisario is a substitute, a replacement, who like Mamaé, lives not his own life but a fictional, alternative one. Belisario is the writer of autobiography. But, what is particularly significant on a number of levels, is that Belisario’s tale is not so much his own autobiography as it is Mamaé’s. Although there can be little doubt that his autobiography is intricately influenced by and mingled with Mamaé’s, the fact is that his tale is principally the retelling of Mamaé’s tales, which are her autobiography. What we have then is autobiography twice removed from its source, doubly, yet consciously and overtly fictionalized, as well as the suggestion that Belisario’s life (and perhaps in turn the life of all writers or even all of us) is doubly fictionalized—his present is a fiction (the work we read or watch being performed) which is based on an older fiction (Mamaé’s tales) which in turn are outgrowths of still other, previous literatures (her concepts of the correct young lady, romance, poetry, etc.). Obviously, the point is that none of us can escape our fictions, that our lives are permeated by fiction on all levels, and that we are all inescapable products of those fictions. In this respect, the most logical format for autobiography is surely theater which overtly presents itself as a reenactment of earlier fictions.

In conclusion, then, Vargas Llosa shows us, via *La señorita de Tacna*, that life is a series of fictions, a continuum of role playing and that no

matter how noble his intentions to discover and present truth or reality, ultimately, the autobiographer merely adds one more role to this continuum: that of autobiographer. Once one role is played to its conclusion, once one tale is told, we have no alternative but to begin another. There can be little doubt that the conclusion of Mamaé's story and Belisario's exit from the stage not only signal the end of the play but also the beginning of another, for the text notes that Belisario not only feels "satisfacción, sin duda, por haber concluído lo que quería contar" but also "vacío y nostalgia por algo que ya acabó, que ya perdió" (p. 145). This lost something will have to be sought once more in the next tale, in the next play and the next role, for what is literature but an endless attempt to fill the *vacío* of life? In this respect *La señorita de Tacna* might be defined as the autobiography of writing.

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#### NOTES

1. *The American College Dictionary* (New York: Random, 1964) adds that the account is written.

2. Throughout this study I shall use the terms reading and writing in reference to autobiography merely for the sake of convenience. As Vargas Llosa suggests in the prologue of *La señorita de Tacna*, telling stories is as much an oral endeavor as a written one, and we might well substitute the terms listening and telling for reading and writing. That Vargas Llosa intended his audience to understand this interchangeability is directly expressed in the prologue: "cómo y por qué nacen las historias. No digo cómo y por qué se escriben— aunque Belisario sea un escritor—, pues la literatura sólo es una provincia de ese vasto quehacer— inventar historias— presente en todas las culturas, incluidas aquellas que desconocen la escritura." See Mario Vargas Llosa, *La señorita de Tacna* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1981), p. 9. All subsequent page references are from this edition.

Obviously, this prologue is missing when as audience we view the play, but the concept is still conveyed via Belisario's gesture of putting his pencil in his mouth: "con el lápiz . . . entre los labios" (p. 23); "levanta el lápiz y se lo lleva a la boca y lo mordisquea" (p. 24). Surely these gestures are intended to draw attention to the interrelationship between the oral gesture and the written.

3. Mary Daly in *Gyn/ecology* (Boston: Beacon, 1978) notes the relationship between the concept of spinster (old maid) and spinner (weaver) (pp. 385–424). We must wonder if Mamaé's "spinning" of tales is not related to her position as spinster.

4. Throughout the text it is apparent that Mamaé's concept of life is based on her reading of romantic literature. She lends Joaquín poems by Barreto who has written one of his poems on her fan; she is fascinated by the life of the slaves. She envisions her wedding, "¿Como en la novelita de Gustavo Flaubert?" (p. 59). Joaquín describes her as "una muñequita sin sangre, una boba que cree que el amor consiste en leer los versos de un bobo que se llama Federico Barreto" (p. 76). At another moment she has decided to live in a hut by the sea "Como en una novelita de Xavier de Montepin" (p. 107).

5. Indeed, it takes a very skillful director to overcome this difficulty. I base my statement here on my personal experience with the 1983 Mexican production of the play where

it was obvious that the audience, having not read the work, found it very difficult to follow the multiple levels of reality/fantasy. For a more complete description of this performance see my "The Spring 1983 Theatre Season in Mexico," *Latin American Theatre Review*, 17 (Fall 1983), 71-2.

6. Obviously, this is also a form of self-censorship which, if one accepts the comments of many women writers, is more prevalent among women than among men.

7. Eduardo Pavlovsky, *La mueca* (Buenos Aires: Talia, n.d.), p. 33.

8. Vargas Llosa also points out in the prologue that one of the major functions of this work is to discover how fictions are made.