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‘A Sinful Passion’: Mario Vargas Llosa’s Readings of Borges from 1964 to 2014

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The critical engagement with Jorge Luis Borges is the longest relationship Mario Vargas Llosa has ever sustained with any author. His first interview with Borges was conducted in 1964, while his last article on Borges’ *Atlas* was published in 2014.¹ Vargas Llosa’s essays dedicated to Borges, along with his interviews with him published between 1964 and 1999, were partly collected in a volume published in French, *Un demi-siècle avec Borges*, in 2004.² More recently, in 2020, an updated Spanish version of this volume, *Medio siglo con Borges*, included additional material published up to 2014.³ Due to their scope, neither of these collections consider Vargas Llosa’s fictional writing and other critical and journalistic works in which Borges emerges as a crucial presence. Likewise, several critics have detected Borges’ influence on Vargas Llosa, but no systematic attempt to examine this fifty-year-old relationship has been made. This essay aims to

1 Mario Vargas Llosa, ‘Preguntas a Borges’ (1964), in *Obras completas*, ed. Antoni Munné-Jordà, 11 vols (Barcelona: Círculo de Lectores, Galaxia Gutenberg, 2004–2016), IX, *Piedra de toque I (1962–1983)*, 109–13; Mario Vargas Llosa, ‘El viaje en globo’, *El País*, 2 October 2014, n.p.; available at <https://elpais.com/elpais/2014/10/02/opinion/1412263372_960591.html> (accessed 18 June 2021).

2 Mario Vargas Llosa, *Un demi-siècle avec Borges*, ed. & trad. Albert Bensoussan (Paris: L’Herne, 2010 [1st ed. 2004]).

3 Mario Vargas Llosa, *Medio siglo con Borges* (Barcelona: Alfaguara, 2020). The volume also includes a fragment (wrongly dated 2018) from Vargas Llosa’s extended essay *El viaje a la ficción. El mundo de Juan Carlos Onetti* (Lima/Madrid: Alfaguara, 2008).

cover this critical gap, studying the reverberations of Borges at different stages of Vargas Llosa's intellectual biography.

1 A Political Reading of Borges' Unrealities

In *Mario Vargas Llosa*, Raymond Williams describes the impression Borges made on Vargas Llosa as a young writer:

More important to Vargas Llosa was what the writing of Borges represented to a young aspiring writer: an invitation to invent rather than imitate reality, a pioneering innovation for a young Latin American intellectual in the late 1940s and early 1950s.⁴

Borges' influence on Vargas Llosa is presented as inspiring and unambiguous. Vargas Llosa's *La tía Julia y el escribidor* (1977) contributes to this impression: its young protagonist Marito, a literary *alter ego* of Vargas Llosa, aims to write 'El salto cualitativo', a short story in the style of Borges: 'frío, intelectual, condensado e irónico como un cuento de Borges'.⁵ I argue that, despite the importance of his early readings of Borges, Vargas Llosa only came to terms with Borges' inventiveness as a mature writer after a conflicted process of assimilation.

Vargas Llosa discovered Borges as a student at the Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos. In his memoir, *El pez en el agua* (1993), he writes that he was introduced to Borges by another future writer, Luis Loyaza, to whom Vargas Llosa dedicates *Conversación en La Catedral* (1969), calling him affectionately 'el borgiano de Petit Thouars'.⁶ In a more recent conversation with Carlos Granés in 2016, Vargas Llosa claimed that he discovered Borges at a lecture given by Ana María Barrenechea held in Lima in the 1950s.⁷ Regardless of how it began, his relationship with Borges has been ambiguous.

Examining the origins of this relationship in 'Las ficciones de Borges', Vargas Llosa claims he was impressed by Borges' writing, but struggled to accept his political conservatism.⁸ His opinion was based on the image of Borges emerging from the second half of the 1950s, when he welcomed the military uprising that ended Juan Perón's second government in 1955 and defined the military dictators in the 1970s as 'the only gentlemen left

4 Raymond L. Williams, *Mario Vargas Llosa* (New York: Ungar, 1986), 165.

5 Mario Vargas Llosa, *La tía Julia y el escribidor* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1977), 59.

6 Mario Vargas Llosa, *El pez en el agua* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1993), 151–53; Mario Vargas Llosa, *Conversación en La Catedral* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1969).

7 Universidad Complutense de Madrid, 'Cursos de Verano UCM 2016—Diálogo con Mario Vargas Llosa', YouTube Video, 15 July 2016; <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T64nFPNPXKM>> (accessed 7 June 2021).

8 Mario Vargas Llosa, 'Las ficciones de Borges' (1988), in his *Contra viento y marea*, 3 vols (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1983–1990), III, (1964–1988), 463–74 (pp. 463–64).

capable of serving the country'.⁹ Due to his anti-Peronist stance, in 1955 Borges was appointed director of the Biblioteca Nacional de la República Argentina by the military government. In response to the type of populism that he associated with the democratic politics that brought Perón to power, Borges developed an ambivalence towards democracy—'descreo de la democracia, ese curioso abuso de la estadística'.¹⁰ He described his affiliation to the Partido Demócrata Conservador in 1963 as an expression of his political scepticism: according to his logic, being a conservative would prevent him from turning into a fanatic; after all, no one can get enthusiastic about conservatism.¹¹ At the time, Vargas Llosa was unaware that Borges' political views had radically shifted over time. In the 1920s he had campaigned on behalf of Radical presidential candidate Hipólito Yrigoyen.¹² In the 1930s and 1940s Borges was considered a marginal writer who opposed the Fascism and Nazism that was spreading throughout Europe. In addition, according to the myth Borges himself reinforced, he lost his job at the Miguel Cané library because of his anti-Peronism.¹³ Furthermore, his early writing was not yet associated with elitism, since he largely engaged with popular culture.¹⁴

As a student, Vargas Llosa participated in communist student groups that had been forbidden by the Manuel Odría dictatorship. Deeply influenced by Jean-Paul Sartre's *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* (1948), Vargas Llosa embraced the Sartrean ideal of a committed writer to such an extent that Loyaza coined the nickname 'el sartrecito valiente' when referring to him.¹⁵ On the other hand, Borges rejected the association between

9 As quoted in Jaime Alazraki, *Borges and the Kabbalah. And Other Essays on His Fiction and Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge U. P., 1988), 179.

10 Jorge Luis Borges, 'Prólogo' to *La moneda de hierro* (1976), in his *Obras completas*, ed. Carlos V. Frías, 3 vols (Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, 1989), III, 1975–1985, 121–22 (p. 122).

11 Jean Milleret, *Entretiens avec Jorge Luis Borges* (Paris: Éditions Pierre Belfond, 1967), 220–21. See also Jean Milleret, *Entrevistas con Jorge Luis Borges*, trad. Gabriel Rodríguez (Caracas: Monte Ávila Editores, 1971 [1st French ed. 1967]), 168–69.

12 Emir Rodríguez Monegal, 'Borges and Politics', trans. Enrico Mario Santi & Carlos J. Alonso, *Diacritics*, 8:4 (1978), 55–69 (p. 58).

13 Borges says that, the day after Perón was elected president, he was 'promoted' to 'the inspectorship of poultry and rabbits in the public market' as a punishment for his anti-Peronism. The episode has been widely accepted as true for years by critics including Emir Rodríguez Monegal, until debunked by Edwin Williamson. See Jorge Luis Borges, 'An Autobiographical Essay', in *The Aleph and Other Stories 1933–1969*, ed. & trans. Jorge Luis Borges & Norman Thomas di Giovanni (London: Jonathan Cape, 1971), 201–60 (p. 244); Emir Rodríguez Monegal, *Jorge Luis Borges: A Literary Bibliography* (New York: Dutton, 1978), 392–93; Mario Vargas Llosa, 'Borges, político', *Letras Libres*, 11 (1999), 24–26 (p. 25); and Edwin Williamson, *Borges: A Life* (New York: Viking, 2004), 291–96.

14 Philip Swanson, 'Borges and Popular Culture', in *The Cambridge Companion to Jorge Luis Borges*, ed. Edwin Williamson (Cambridge: Cambridge U. P., 2013), 81–95 (pp. 81–88).

15 Vargas Llosa, *El pez en el agua*, 152.

literature and politics.¹⁶ His scepticism towards the political action of artists was rooted in his strong belief of human fallibility—‘[e]l concepto de arte comprometido es una ingenuidad, porque nadie sabe del todo lo que ejecuta’.¹⁷ Vargas Llosa felt that Borges and his narrative were antithetical to Sartre’s thinking:

Para mí representaba, de manera químicamente pura, todo aquello que Sartre me había enseñado a odiar: el artista evadido de su mundo y de la actualidad en un universo intelectual de erudición y de fantasía; el escritor desdeñoso de la política, de la historia y hasta de la realidad que exhibía con impudor su escepticismo y su risueño desdén sobre todo lo que no fuera la literatura; el intelectual que no sólo se permitía ironizar sobre los dogmas y utopías de la izquierda sino que llevaba su iconoclasia hasta el extremo de afiliarse al Partido Conservador con el insolente argumento de que los caballeros se afilian de preferencia a las causas perdidas.¹⁸

The political interpretation of Borges and the criticism of his intellectualism are symptomatic of the influence Sartre had on Vargas Llosa. Vargas Llosa’s articles ‘Regreso a San Marcos’ and ‘Catorce minutos de reflexión’, dedicated to the suspense he felt whilst waiting for the official confirmation of the Nobel Prize for literature, outline the crucial role this dichotomy had in his life and literary career: his discussions on Borges and Sartre with his friends Loyaza and Abelardo Oquendo appear among his dearest memories.¹⁹ The antithesis between them is indeed more radical than the opposition between Sartre and Albert Camus, which received more critical attention. While Vargas Llosa’s perplexities about Camus focused on political and philosophical issues, his aversion to Borges’ intellectualism and conservative sympathies co-existed with the pleasure he derived from Borges’ writing as a reader, which led him to describe his fascination with Borges as ‘una pasión secreta y pecadora’.²⁰

In 1964, as a broadcaster for French radio and television, Vargas Llosa had the opportunity to interview Borges, who was giving a series of talks in Paris. The interview offers an insight into Borges’ irreverent indifference to the novel as a genre and his broad understanding of literature including historical and philosophical works such as Edward Gibbon’s *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–1789) and Bertrand Russell’s *Introduction*

16 Jorge Luis Borges & Osvaldo Ferrari, *Reencuentro: diálogos inéditos* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1999), 155.

17 Jorge Luis Borges, ‘Prólogo’ to *La rosa profunda* (1975), in his *Obras completas*, ed. Frías, III, 77–78 (p. 77).

18 Vargas Llosa, ‘Las ficciones de Borges’, 411–12.

19 See Mario Vargas Llosa, ‘Regreso a San Marcos’ (April 2001) and ‘Catorce minutos de reflexión’ (October 2010), both included in his *Obras completas*, ed. Munné-Jordà, XI, *Piedra de toque III (2000–2012)*, 162–68 & 1315–18 respectively.

20 Vargas Llosa, ‘Las ficciones de Borges’, 412.

to *Mathematical Philosophy* (1919). Vargas Llosa dissimulates his lack of enthusiasm for Borges' talks, which is conveyed by 'Borges en París', published thirty-five years later. The article gives a detailed account of Borges' talks at an *homage* to Shakespeare organized by UNESCO and at a conference on fantasy literature at the Instituto de América Latina. Vargas Llosa emphasizes how Borges' dazzling talks enchanted the audience.²¹

Vargas Llosa voiced his perplexity about Borges in his conversations with Gabriel García Márquez in Lima in September 1967. Brought together and published in *Diálogo sobre la novela latinoamericana*, these conversations took place only one month after Vargas Llosa had given his acceptance speech—'La literatura es fuego'—for the inaugural Rómulo Gallegos Prize.²² The speech transposed Sartre's idea of the committed writer to the Latin-American context and presented literature as 'una forma de insurrección permanente'.²³ In dialogue with Vargas Llosa, García Márquez argues that the novel must fulfil a subversive function that is aesthetic as well as political. Prompted by their musing upon the social function of literature, the conversation turns to their efforts to conceive of Latin America as a whole and its literature as an expression of a shared sensitivity. When the conversation shifts to Borges, García Márquez confesses his admiration for Borges' linguistic skills, but disdains his works:

Borges es uno de los autores que yo más leo y que más he leído y tal vez el que menos me gusta. A Borges lo leo por su extraordinaria capacidad de artificio verbal; es un hombre que enseña a escribir, es decir, que enseña a afinar el instrumento para decir las cosas. [...] Borges trabaja sobre realidades mentales, es pura evasión [...] A mí, personalmente, esa literatura no me interesa. Yo creo que toda gran literatura tiene que fundarse sobre una realidad concreta.²⁴

These words resonate with Vargas Llosa's confession about his struggles to justify his admiration for Borges' fantastic tales. For Vargas Llosa social engagement emerges as an aesthetic criterion that shapes a literary hierarchy: 'la literatura de evasión [...] es una literatura obligatoriamente [...] menos significativa que una literatura que busca su material en una realidad concreta'.²⁵ Over the years, Vargas Llosa has stressed the porosity of the borders between fiction and reality in his writing, but in this early

21 Mario Vargas Llosa, 'Borges en París' (6 June 1999), in *Obras completas*, ed. Munné-Jordà, X, *Piedra de toque II (1984–1999)*, 1342–47.

22 Gabriel García Márquez & Mario Vargas Llosa, *Diálogo sobre la novela latinoamericana* (Lima: Editorial Perú Andino, 1988).

23 Mario Vargas Llosa, 'La literatura es fuego' (1967), in his *Contra viento y marea*, I, (1962–1972), 176–81 (p. 179).

24 García Márquez & Vargas Llosa, *Diálogo sobre la novela latinoamericana*, 41.

25 García Márquez & Vargas Llosa, *Diálogo sobre la novela latinoamericana*, 41.

stage of his career, ‘reality’ emerges as a lived experience inspiring a narrative in opposition to pure imagination.²⁶ Unaware of Borges’ works such as ‘La fiesta del monstruo’, which expressed a criticism of Perón, Vargas Llosa dismissed Borges’ literature as a form of escapism.²⁷ Nevertheless, he struggles to reconcile Borges’ writing with his persona:

Un escritor con una mentalidad como la de Borges, por ejemplo, profundamente conservadora, profundamente reaccionaria, en cuanto creador no es un reaccionario, no es un conservador; yo no encuentro en las obras de Borges [...] nada que proponga una concepción reaccionaria de la sociedad, de la historia, una visión inmovilista del mundo, una visión en fin, que exalte, digamos, el fascismo o cosas que él admira come el imperialismo. Yo no encuentro nada de eso.²⁸

The absence of reactionary drive makes Borges’ narrative even more problematic to Vargas Llosa. Symptomatic of their inability to interpret Borges’ *oeuvre* beyond his authorial figure, the reductionism of García Márquez’s and Vargas Llosa’s political interpretations contrasts with their careful readings of his narrative.

In his doctoral thesis, published as *García Márquez: historia de un deicidio*, Vargas Llosa recognizes the analogies between the use of enumeration in Borges’ ‘El Aleph’ and the enumeration of the circus artists and animals in the vision that Colonel Aureliano Buendía has before dying in *Cien años de soledad* (1967).²⁹ Despite their familiarity with his work, both García Márquez and Vargas Llosa seem to overlook the fact that Borges’ notion of the unreal is not exclusively playful, as expressed in ‘Nueva refutación del tiempo’:

Negar la sucesión temporal, negar el yo, negar el universo astronómico, son desesperaciones aparentes y consuelos secretos. Nuestro destino [...] no es espantoso por irreal; es espantoso porque es irreversible y de hierro.³⁰

26 For a description of his concept of reality at this stage, see Mario Vargas Llosa, ‘La novela’, in *Los novelistas como críticos*, ed. Norma Klahn & Wilfrido H. Correal (México D.F.: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1991), 341–59.

27 Jorge Luis Borges & Adolfo Bioy Casares, ‘La fiesta del monstruo’ (1947), in *Nuevos cuentos de Bustos Domecq* (Madrid: Ediciones Siruela, 1986), 101–22.

28 García Márquez & Vargas Llosa, *Diálogo sobre la novela latinoamericana*, 45.

29 Mario Vargas Llosa, *García Márquez: historia de un deicidio* (Barcelona: Barral Editores, 1971), 211–12; Jorge Luis Borges, ‘El Aleph’ (1945), in his *Obras completas, 1923–1972*, ed. Carlos V. Frías (Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, 1974), 617–28. See also Gabriel García Márquez, *Cien años de soledad* (Bogotá: Editorial Norma, 1967).

30 Jorge Luis Borges, ‘Nueva refutación del tiempo’ (1947), in his *Obras completas, 1923–1972*, ed. Frías, 757–71 (p. 771).

The failure to recognize the existential struggle Borges attaches to the unreal is striking, considering that Vargas Llosa refers to Barrenechea's *La expresión de la irrealidad en la obra de Jorge Luis Borges*, a study focusing on the complexity of Borges' narrative assault on Western understandings of the 'real' and its implications.³¹ The hypothesis that Vargas Llosa might have read Barrenechea's work only years after attending her lecture should not be excluded.

Moreover, *García Márquez: historia de un deicidio* introduces a trope in Vargas Llosa's reading of Borges, namely the absence of human passion.³² Drawing on Reinaldo Arenas' comments on the influence of Borges on phrasal structures and oneiric images in *Cien años de soledad*, Vargas Llosa notices its reverberations at a thematic level in the mirages of labyrinths and the dreams of forgetting that García Márquez's characters have: 'la materia [...] trasluce su estirpe borgiana por su naturaleza de lúcido artificio mental, de objeto acuñado con una inteligencia audaz y fría'.³³ Borges' craft consists of exploring hallucinatory states with the same lucidity characteristic of his intellectual speculations. Bold and cold, the adjectives describing Borges' intelligence, convey the imaginative potential as well as the limitations of his literature, too abstract to express human instincts:

Ni siquiera es necesario mencionar las astrales diferencias que separan a un Borges, con sus meticulosos laberintos intelectuales, sus perfectos sofismas, sus juegos teológicos, sus trampas metafísicas, su mundo de suprema inteligencia y de absoluta asexualidad, con el territorio sanguíneo de pasiones encabritadas, instintos desmedidos y violenta espontaneidad que es Macondo.³⁴

Until this moment, Vargas Llosa's criticism mainly addressed Borges' reluctance to engage with Latin America's socio-economic contexts; however, in this fragment, he underlines how Borges' intellectualism fails to grasp those physical drives that were pivotal in García Márquez. Although Vargas Llosa sets them in opposition, my next step is to argue that his reading of García Márquez is at the heart of the theoretical

31 Ana María Barrenechea, *La expresión de la irrealidad en la obra de Jorge Luis Borges* (México D.F.: El Colegio de México, 1957).

32 Ariel de la Fuente challenges the idea of Borges as an asexual author in *Borges, Desire, and Sex* (Liverpool: Liverpool U. P., 2018).

33 Reinaldo Arenas, 'En la ciudad de los espejismos' (1968), in *García Márquez*, ed. Peter G. Earle (Madrid: Taurus, 1981), 151–57 (pp. 154–55); Vargas Llosa, *García Márquez: historia de un deicidio*, 211.

34 Vargas Llosa, *García Márquez: historia de un deicidio*, 212.

understanding through which Vargas Llosa re-interprets Borges beyond the political understanding of literature that he derived from Sartre.

2 Borges Reconsidered

The period between 1967, the year when ‘La literatura es fuego’ was read, and 1971, the year of publication of his study on García Márquez, is crucial in Vargas Llosa’s political thought. The articles published in these four years document Vargas Llosa’s progressive estrangement from the Left in the name of freedom of expression. Among the writings of this period, I will focus on ‘Luzbel, Europa y otras conspiraciones’.³⁵ Addressing the comments made by Colombian writer Óscar Collazos, who described his stance on Fidel Castro as reactionary, Vargas Llosa expands on the understanding of subversion in literature that he introduced in ‘La literatura es fuego’. Unlike Collazos, Vargas Llosa argues that subversion is not exclusively aimed at promoting socialist ideals within capitalist societies, but also at exercising a function of criticism within any society, including a socialist society, as demonstrated by Aleksander Solzhenitsyn.³⁶ Literature is subversive because it allows individuals to express their dissatisfaction towards the injustices and contradictions that exist within any society.

Moreover, in ‘Luzbel, Europa y otras conspiraciones’, Vargas Llosa emphasizes the need to separate the writer’s socio-political creed from their work: ‘hay un divorcio flagrante entre los valores implícitos en una obra literaria y los valores (o “desvalores”) que objetivamente manifiesta un autor en su conducta social o política’.³⁷ Rather than suggesting that the discrepancies between a writer’s works and political views are understandable within an individual’s human trajectory, Vargas Llosa explores the limitations of a writer’s political engagement by drawing on his understanding of literary creation. Stressing that progressive authors can be conservative in their works and *vice versa*, Vargas Llosa underlines that the choice of a theme for a writer is neither entirely rational nor conscious:

[...] el acto de la creación se nutre simultáneamente [...] de las dos fases de la personalidad del creador: la racional y la irracional, las convicciones y las obsesiones, su vida consciente y su vida inconsciente. [...] Yo pienso que esos elementos inconscientes, obsesivos, que he llamado los ‘demonios’ de un escritor [...], son los que determinan casi siempre los

35 Mario Vargas Llosa, ‘Luzbel, Europa y otras conspiraciones’ (1970), in *Contra viento y marea*, I, 231–40.

36 Vargas Llosa, ‘Luzbel, Europa y otras conspiraciones’, 238.

37 Vargas Llosa, ‘Luzbel, Europa y otras conspiraciones’, 233.

'temas' de una obra, y que el gobierno racional que un autor puede ejercer sobre ellos es escaso o nulo.³⁸

I read this quotation with Borges in mind. The acknowledgment of a writer's limited control over their material aligns with Borges' idea of human fallibility that was discussed previously. Emphasizing that a writer's themes are determined by irrational and unconscious motives, Vargas Llosa seems to suggest that Borges should not be held accountable for the absence of political engagement in his fiction. Although he is not explicitly mentioned, Borges seems to be an obvious reference as Vargas Llosa underlines that even the works of those intellectual writers who most rigorously organize their creative acts display the unconscious sides of their creators' personalities, which often prevail over the rational elements.³⁹

Examining Vargas Llosa's transition from his socialist to neo-liberal beliefs, Efraín Kristal identifies *La orgía perpetua: Flaubert y 'Madame Bovary'* as the theoretical work which marks Vargas Llosa's abandonment of the idea that literature is revolutionary in a political sense.⁴⁰ Early traces of this new stance can be found in 'Luzbel, Europa y otras conspiraciones', as I have discussed, and in *García Márquez: historia de un deicidio*. In the latter, Vargas Llosa further develops his view of the novel as a subversive form—as discussed with García Márquez in 1967—into a theory of literary creation:

Escribir novelas es un acto de rebelión contra la realidad, contra Dios, contra la creación de Dios que es la realidad. Es una tentativa de corrección, cambio o abolición de la realidad real, de su sustitución por la realidad ficticia que el novelista crea. [...] La raíz de su vocación es un sentimiento de insatisfacción contra la vida; cada novela es un deicidio secreto, un asesinato simbólico de la realidad.⁴¹

The rebelliousness of the novel, its *raison d'être*, is more ontological than political. The emphasis is on the illusion created by the artist to evade a

38 Vargas Llosa, 'Luzbel, Europa y otras conspiraciones', 233.

39 Vargas Llosa emphasizes the rigorous intellectual symmetries of Borges' stories in 'Antes del diluvio' (February 1994), in *Obras completas*, ed. Munné-Jordà, X, *Piedra de toque II (1984–1999)*, 716, and their careful thematic organization in 'El regreso de Satán', (June 1972), in *Obras completas*, ed. Munné-Jordà, IX, *Piedra de toque I (1962–1983)*, 521–28 (p. 526).

40 Vargas Llosa describes himself as a liberal rather than a neo-liberal. See Mario Vargas Llosa, 'Confesiones de un liberal', *Letras Libres* (Mexico), 31 May 2005, pp. 42–45; available at: <<https://www.letraslibres.com/mexico-espana/confesiones-un-liberal>> (accessed 18 June 2021); and Efraín Kristal, *Temptation of the Word: The Novels of Mario Vargas Llosa* (Nashville: Vanderbilt U. P., 1999), 81. See also Mario Vargas Llosa, *La orgía perpetua: Flaubert y 'Madame Bovary'* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1975).

41 Vargas Llosa, *García Márquez: historia de un deicidio*, 90.

dissatisfying situation. The engagement with historical and social issues now sits in the background. The oscillation from his juvenile view of the committed writer as a promoter of social change to the search for forms of rebellion in the arts is crucial in opening up a new perspective on Borges. The notion of *deicide*, a symbolic assassination of God that replaces reality with a parallel world created by the writer, becomes the frame through which Vargas Llosa interprets Borges. The interconnectedness of Vargas Llosa's readings of García Márquez and Borges emerges in his review of John Sturrock's *Paper Tigers: The Ideal Fictions of Jorge Luis Borges*, entitled 'El deicidio borgeano'.⁴²

In this article, Vargas Llosa writes that he once considered writing an essay entitled 'Borges, novelista'.⁴³ This is obviously provocative, since Borges not only never wrote a novel, but rejected the genre:

Desvarío laborioso y empobrecedor el de componer vastos libros; el de explicar en quinientas páginas una idea, cuya perfecta exposición oral cabe en pocos minutos. Mejor procedimiento es simular que esos libros ya existen y ofrecer un resumen, un comentario.⁴⁴

So why does Vargas Llosa hint at Borges being a novelist? Observing the pervasive presence of invented novels, reviews of novels and writers of novels in Borges' *oeuvre*, Vargas Llosa believed that if those opinions and simulations were brought together, they could constitute a treatise on the novel. The theory of creativity Sturrock draws from Borges' fiction offers Vargas Llosa a key to Borges' intellectualism and its relationship to the novel:

Borges ha hecho con la pedantería cultural lo que, según él, hicieron los novelistas norteamericanos con la brutalidad: convertirla en una técnica literaria. Intricadas referencias librescas, alusiones a comentarios de comentarios, exóticos autores o textos o filosofías mencionada como al descuido, [...] son, en los cuentos de Borges, lo que los muebles y objetos en las novelas de Balzac, o los castillos en las de Sade: el decorado indispensable de la acción. Lo que esas citas y asociaciones culturales tienen de 'científico' pierde importancia en los cuentos de Borges; ellas levitan, gráciles, sorprendentes, risueñas,

42 John Sturrock, *Paper Tigers: The Ideal Fiction of Jorge Luis Borges* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977). Vargas Llosa's review was initially published in English under the title 'A Reality Against Reality', *The Times Literary Supplement*, 28 April 1978, p. 470.

43 Mario Vargas Llosa, 'El deicidio borgeano', in *Obras completas*, ed. Munné-Jordà, IX, *Piedra de toque I (1962–1983)*, 683–90 (p. 683).

44 Jorge Luis Borges, 'Prólogo' to 'El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan' (1941), in his *Obras completas, 1923–1972*, ed. Frías, 429.

disociadas de su origen (real o inventado) para cumplir una función distinta (es decir ficticia) dentro del relato.⁴⁵

The intellectual references Vargas Llosa would once have considered a form of elitist withdrawal from political issues were now the means to contrast fiction and lived experience: 'esta concepción de la literatura como realidad alternativa a la real es íntimamente borgiana'.⁴⁶ Disregarded eleven years earlier in conversation with García Márquez, Borges' intellectual escapism is now interpreted in light of the understanding of the novel that Vargas Llosa draws from the Colombian writer as a form that shapes imaginary worlds in opposition to a dissatisfying reality. Borges' cultural references are presented as the tools with which to replace life with fiction, and to carry out his deicide:

En el curso de esta alquimia, las cosas, los hombres, la historia, la vida objetiva [...] mudan en algo que no es su reflejo sino su antítesis: la 'idea', es decir, palabras, es decir, forma, es decir literatura.⁴⁷

This standpoint offers Vargas Llosa a new perspective on the radical nature of Borges' aesthetics: 'Borges, a través de la filosofía y la literatura [...] llegó a defender la absoluta autonomía de la ficción respecto de lo real'.⁴⁸ Written when he was forty-two, 'El deicidio borgeano' conveys Vargas Llosa's adult reconciliation with Borges' inventiveness.

This literary reconciliation inaugurates a wider reconsideration of Borges, inclusive of his political persona. 'Borges en su casa' relates Vargas Llosa's meeting with Borges in Buenos Aires in 1981.⁴⁹ Vargas Llosa refers to a question he allegedly put to him during their talk in 1964, when he asked Borges what was politics for him? Borges answered that politics was one of the forms of tedium. When asked if his feelings were still the same, Borges replies that politics has become a nuisance.⁵⁰ It should be noted that Vargas Llosa never posed that question directly, or at least he did not transcribe it. In the published transcription, Vargas Llosa asks Borges about his impressions of a colloquium between German and Latin-American writers he attended in Berlin. Borges replies that he appreciated the opportunity to talk with some colleagues, but complains that those writers talked very little of literature and a lot about politics, a rather tedious theme ('un tema que es más bien, bueno, digamos tedioso').⁵¹

45 Vargas Llosa, 'El deicidio borgeano', 684.

46 Vargas Llosa, 'El deicidio borgeano', 686.

47 Vargas Llosa, 'El deicidio borgeano', 686.

48 Vargas Llosa, 'El deicidio borgeano', 686.

49 Mario Vargas Llosa, 'Borges en su casa' (July 1981), in *Obras completas*, ed. Munné-Jordà, IX, *Piedra de toque I (1962-1983)*, 1094-98.

50 Vargas Llosa, 'Borges en su casa', 1096.

51 Vargas Llosa, 'Preguntas a Borges', 109.

Elegant and ironic, the formulation of Borges' lack of interest in politics that Vargas Llosa remembers sounds more Borgesian than even Borges' own words. The fact that Vargas Llosa has recalled this sentence several times, including in his later essay 'Borges, político' and in his talk with Granés, is indicative of the extent to which Borges' apparent indifference towards politics has been predominant in how he has been characterized.⁵² Indeed, Borges described politics as a form of nuisance in their 1981 discussion. He hinted at the accusations of senility and anti-patriotism he received from the Right for acknowledging Chile's reasons in the conflict over the Beagle channel, and for claiming that the military dictators, who were ruling Argentina under the leadership of Jorge Videla, should leave the government because spending a life in military parades had never given anyone the ability to govern. Borges' declaration that the Argentine military had never heard the whistle of a bullet, a statement he later rectified ironically, provoked a scandalous reaction.⁵³ In 'Borges en su casa', Vargas Llosa avoids mentioning Borges' initial support for Videla's regime, which he addresses in 'Borges, político'. Repositioning Borges politically, Vargas Llosa draws a more neutral image of him as equally distant from both the Right and the Left. Vargas Llosa reads Borges' attitude towards the military dictatorship as a sign of anti-authoritarianism in line with his own liberal belief, influenced by Albert Camus, Isaiah Berlin, Karl Popper and Jean-François Revel, that economic freedom is inextricably interwoven with political freedom.⁵⁴ Perceived as less and less controversial, Borges' legacy becomes exemplary of the creative dialogue that Latin American artists are able to establish with Europe in Vargas Llosa's essay, 'Botero: la suntuosa abundancia'.⁵⁵ In one

52 Mario Vargas Llosa, 'Borges, político', 24.

53 Ricardo Wulicher, director of the 1978 documentary *Borges para millones*, talks about this episode with Edit Tendlarez: 'Mientras estábamos rodando [...], Borges declara, ante las alternativas posible de una guerra con Chile, que una gota de un soldado argentino o de un soldado chileno, no justificaba semejante disparate. Esto es replicado por los militares argentinos como un acto de traición. A lo cual Borges contesta: "En realidad los militares argentinos nunca escucharon oír el silbido de una bala." En ese momento uno de los generales dice que esto es absolutamente falso, y que él había oído el silbido de una bala, y le pido a Borges que se ratifique o que se rectifique. A lo cual el otro día, Borges replica con una maestría maravillosa, que se rectifica, que hubo *una vez* en que *un* militar argentino oyó silbar *una bala*' (Edit Tendlarez, 'Ricardo Wulicher: *Borges y el cine*', in *Los que conocieron a Borges nos cuentan*, selección & prólogo de Edit Tendlarez [Buenos Aires: Tres Haches, 2000], 155–58 [pp. 156–57]). The anecdote is also told by Monegal in the extended Spanish edition of his biography of Borges: Emir Rodríguez Monegal, *Borges: una biografía literaria* (México D.F.: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1987), 421.

54 Vargas Llosa, 'Confesiones de un liberal', 43.

55 Vargas Llosa writes, 'En un celebre ensayo contra las veleidades nacionalistas en el orden cultural, Jorge Luis Borges escribió: "Creo que nuestra tradición es toda la cultura occidental y creo también que tenemos derecho a esa tradición, mayor que el que pueden

of the additional notes to the English translation of 'Las ficciones de Borges', included in *A Writer's Reality*, Vargas Llosa claims Borges was not awarded the Nobel prize because of his right-wing statements which alienated him from the leftist cultural establishment.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, Vargas Llosa believed Borges was not a conservative, and describes him as a brave man for his opposition to Perón.

In 'Las ficciones de Borges', his most comprehensive discussion of the Argentinian to date, Vargas Llosa describes Borges as the most important thing to happen to literature in the Spanish language in modern times.⁵⁷ Addressing the European legacy without any sense of colonial subjection, Borges proved that Latin-American writers were legitimate heirs of Western culture. Few Europeans, Vargas Llosa writes, assimilated the Western literary tradition as fully as Borges:

¿Quién entre sus contemporáneos, se movió con igual desenvoltura por los mitos escandinavos, la poesía anglosajona, la filosofía alemana, la literatura del Siglo de Oro, los poetas ingleses, Dante, Homero, y los mitos y leyendas del Medio y el Extremo Oriente que Europa tradujo y divulgó?⁵⁸

In this extract, there is no longer any trace of the perplexities that Vargas Llosa once expressed about Borges' elitism. Likewise, while during his youth he criticized the absence of human passions in Borges' writings, in this mature reconsideration of the writer Vargas Llosa celebrates Borges' abstractions. Conceiving of Spanish as a language that traditionally conveys a way of being in which the emotional prevails over the intellectual, Vargas Llosa praises Borges for his ability to turn the Spanish language into a means of expressing the abstract and the intellectual:

[...] al depurarlo, intelectualizarlo y colorearlo del modo tan personal como lo hizo, demostró que el español [...] era potencialmente [...] capaz de volverse tan lúcido y lógico como el francés y tan riguroso y matizado como el inglés.⁵⁹

tener los habitantes de una u otra nación occidental... Creo que los ... sudamericanos ... podemos manejar todos los temas europeos, manejarlos sin superstición, con una irreverencia que puede tener, y ya tiene, consecuencias afortunadas". La obra de Botero es una de esas afortunadas consecuencias. Su pintura es una excepcional prueba de cómo un artista latinoamericano puede hallarse a sí mismo—y expresar, por lo tanto, a su mundo—estableciendo un diálogo creativo con Europa [...] (Mario Vargas Llosa, 'La suntuosa abundancia' [10 February 1986], in *Obras completas*, ed. Munné-Jordà, X, *Piedra de toque II [1984-1999]*, 121-35 [p. 131]).

56 Mario Vargas Llosa, 'An Invitation to Borges's Fiction', in *A Writer's Reality*, ed., with an intro., by Myron I. Lichtblau (Syracuse: Syracuse U. P., 1991), 1-19 (pp. 12-13, n. 20).

57 Vargas Llosa, 'Las ficciones de Borges', 412.

58 Vargas Llosa, 'Las ficciones de Borges', 413.

59 Vargas Llosa, 'Las ficciones de Borges', 417.

Challenging what Vargas Llosa describes as the natural tendency towards rhetorical excess of the Spanish language, Borges developed a literary style driven by the strictest linguistic frugality. Thematically, his style reverberates in the elimination of all references to the material aspects of human experience:

La singularidad del mundo borgiano consiste en que, en él, lo existencial, lo histórico, el sexo, la psicología, los sentimientos, el instinto, etc., han sido disueltos y reducidos a una dimensión exclusivamente intelectual. Y la vida, ese hirviente y caótico tumulto, llega al lector sublimada y conceptualizada, mudada en mito literario por el filtro borgiano, un filtro de una pulcritud lógica tan acabada y perfecta que parece, a veces, no quintaesenciar la vida sino abolirla.⁶⁰

Borges' deicide becomes obvious in his treatment of the Spanish language through the exclusion of the physical, the instinctual and the sentimental. As he writes in his tale 'El inmortal', '[n]o hay placer más complejo que el pensamiento y a él nos entregamos'.⁶¹ Borges' intellectualism emerges as the key to understanding his experience as a creator and how it interweaves with Borges the man: 'Aquel intenso comercio con la literatura europea fue, también, un modo de configurar una geografía personal, una manera de ser Borges'.⁶² Evocative of the dichotomy between the man and the writer that Borges immortalized in 'Borges y yo', this insight into intellectualism as a way to articulate Borges' personality re-emerges in Vargas Llosa's later article, 'Borges entre señoras'.⁶³ Commenting on *Textos cautivos: ensayos y reseñas en 'El Hogar' (1936–1939)*, a selection of the texts Borges wrote for an Argentine magazine for housewives, Vargas Llosa underlines that Borges disregarded the level of education and knowledge of literature of his audience.⁶⁴ Although it was not appropriately tailored to his readers, this unmitigated intellectualism showed his intimate engagement with culture: 'Son textos en los que, a pesar de su brevedad, el autor se juega a fondo, desnudándose de cuerpo entero, mostrando sus manías, fobias, filias, anhelos íntimos'.⁶⁵ Borges'

60 Vargas Llosa, 'Las ficciones de Borges', 421.

61 Jorge Luis Borges, 'El inmortal' (1947), in *Obras completas, 1923–1972*, ed. Frías, 533–544 (p. 541).

62 Vargas Llosa, 'Las ficciones de Borges', 417.

63 Mario Vargas Llosa, 'Borges entre señoras', *El País*, 14 August 2011, n.p.; available at <https://elpais.com/diario/2011/08/14/opinion/1313272813_850215.html> (accessed 18 June 2021). See also Jorge Luis Borges, 'Borges y yo' (1957), in his *Obras completas, 1923–1972*, ed. Frías, 808.

64 Jorge Luis Borges, *Textos cautivos: ensayos y reseñas en 'El Hogar' (1936–1939)*, ed. Enrique Sacerio Garí & Emir Rodríguez Monegal (Buenos Aires: Marginales Tusquets Editores, 1986).

65 Vargas Llosa, 'Borges entre señoras'.

writing reveals his intimate relationship with culture. This focus on Borges' affective attachment to literature seems to divert Vargas Llosa's attention away from the lack of political charge in Borges' work.

When taken together, Vargas Llosa's idea of the intrinsic rebelliousness of art, coupled with his focus on Borges' tension with authoritarian regimes, could point towards the same interpretation of Borges that José Eduardo González proposes. González refers to Borges' 'El milagro secreto', which tells the story of Jaromir Hladík, a Jewish writer who is imprisoned by the Nazis, but still manages to finish composing his play in his mind before being executed.⁶⁶ The tale is exemplary of the political value of Borges' *oeuvre*. Hladík's play, which will never be printed nor read, exemplifies Borges' notion of literary autonomy: it is a purposeless work of art, and at the same time an act of rebellion.⁶⁷ Intentionally overlooking the political implications of Borges' fiction, Vargas Llosa brings to light its emotional implications. In the next section, I shall discuss the ways in which Vargas Llosa looks at erudition as a means to achieve a sense of personal realization that cannot be fulfilled in our private existences, and how he reconciles Borges' intellectualism with his own engagement with sexuality in his erotic novel *Los cuadernos de don Rigoberto*.⁶⁸

3 Erudition and Affect: The Influence of Borges on Vargas Llosa's Fiction

Several of Vargas Llosa's novels have been linked to Borges, starting with *La tía Julia y el escribidor*, published in 1977, one year before he published 'El deicidio borgeano', which redefined his understanding of Borges. Keith Booker considers the resonance of Borges' conception of literature, according to which every writer creates their own precursors, in *La tía Julia y el escribidor* and *La guerra del fin del mundo*.⁶⁹ Alfred MacAdam compares the way in which Vargas Llosa and Borges experimented with detective fiction: as a detective story in which the discovery of the murder is not an essential aspect of the plot, Vargas Llosa's *¿Quién mató a Palomino Molero?* is reminiscent of Borges' 'Emma Zunz'.⁷⁰ Williams

66 Jorge Luis Borges, 'El milagro secreto' (1943), in his *Obras completas, 1923–1972*, ed. Frías, 508–13.

67 José Eduardo González, *Borges and the Politics of Form* (New York/London: Garland Publishing, 1998), 189.

68 Mario Vargas Llosa, *Los cuadernos de don Rigoberto* (Madrid: Alfaguara, 1997).

69 Keith Booker, *Vargas Llosa among the Postmodernists* (Gainesville: Univ. Press of Florida, 1994), 76–79. See also Mario Vargas Llosa, *La guerra del fin del mundo* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1981).

70 Alfred MacAdam, 'Symmetry and Denunciation in *¿Quién Mató a Palomino Molero?*', in *Mario Vargas Llosa and the Persistence of Memory: Celebrating the 40th anniversary of 'La ciudad y los perros' ('The Time of the Hero') and Other Works*, ed. Miguel Ángel Zapata (Lima:

observes that in Vargas Llosa's *Elogio de la madrastra* 'language [...] seems more powerful than empirical reality', in the manner of Borges' 'Las ruinas circulares'.⁷¹ Kristal has underlined several analogies between Borges and Vargas Llosa. He suggests that Vargas Llosa's *El sueño del celta* and *La fiesta del chivo* might be loosely inspired by Borges' 'Tema del traidor y del héroe' and 'La fiesta del monstruo' respectively, which he wrote with Adolfo Bioy Casares.⁷² Furthermore, Kristal notes that Urania and Flora, the protagonists of Vargas Llosa's *La fiesta del chivo* and *El paraíso en la otra esquina*, repress their sexual desires as a result of traumatic experiences, as is the case for Borges' Emma Zunz.⁷³ Their writings also display similar ethnocentric stances. Kristal identifies an antecedent of Vargas Llosa's *El hablador* in Borges' 'El etnógrafo', noting the similarities of the plots as they focus on young anthropologists who become sceptical of their discipline.⁷⁴ Although in 'Las ficciones de Borges' he underlines the ethnocentrism pervading Borges' *oeuvre* ('para Borges, la civilización solo podía ser occidental, urbana y [casi, casi] blanca'), Vargas Llosa has been strongly criticized for his representations of Machiguenga and Quechua cultures in *El hablador* and *Lituma en los Andes* as well as for his discussion of the relationship between indigenous cultures and Western society in essays such as 'El nacimiento de Perú' and *La utopía arcaica*.⁷⁵

Univ. Nacional Mayor de San Marcos/Hempstead, NY: Hofstra Univ., 2006), 107–12 (pp. 109–10). See also Jorge Luis Borges, 'Emma Zunz' (1948), in his *Obras completas, 1923–1972*, ed. Frías, 564–68; and Mario Vargas Llosa, *¿Quién mató a Palomino Molero?* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1986).

71 Williams, *Mario Vargas Llosa*, 165. See also Mario Vargas Llosa, *Elogio de la madrastra* (Bogotá: Arango Editores, 1988); and Jorge Luis Borges, 'Las ruinas circulares' (1941), in his *Obras completas, 1923–1972*, ed. Frías, 451–55.

72 Efraín Kristal, 'From Utopia to Reconciliation: *The Way to Paradise, The Bad Girl and The Dream of the Celt*', in *The Cambridge Companion to Mario Vargas Llosa*, ed. Efraín Kristal & John King (Cambridge: Cambridge U. P., 2012), 129–48 (p. 141). See also Efraín Kristal, '“The Fault Is Not in the Stars ...” Moral Responsibility in the Political Novels of Mario Vargas Llosa', in *Mario Vargas Llosa and the Persistence of Memory*, ed. Zapata, 87–99 (p. 98); Jorge Luis Borges, 'Tema del traidor y del héroe' (1944), in *Obras completas, 1923–1972*, ed. Frías, 496–98; Mario Vargas Llosa, *El sueño del celta* (Madrid: Alfaguara, 2010); and Mario Vargas Llosa, *La fiesta del chivo* (Madrid: Alfaguara, 2000).

73 Kristal, 'From Utopia to Reconciliation', 147, n. 14. See also Mario Vargas Llosa, *El paraíso en la otra esquina* (México D.F.: Alfaguara, 2003).

74 Kristal, *Temptation of the Word*, 168. See also Jorge Luis Borges, 'El etnógrafo', in his *Obras completas, 1923–1972*, ed. Frías, 989–90; Mario Vargas Llosa, *El hablador* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1987).

75 Vargas Llosa, 'Las ficciones de Borges', 422. See Juan E. De Castro, 'Mario Vargas Llosa Versus Barbarism', *Latin American Research Review*, 45:2 (2010), 5–26; Ignacio López-Calvo, 'Going Native: Anti-indigenism in Vargas Llosa's *The Storyteller* and *Death in the Andes*', in *Vargas Llosa and Latin American Politics*, ed. Juan E. De Castro & Nicholas Birns (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 103–24; and Braulio Muñoz, *A Storyteller: Mario Vargas Llosa Between Civilization and Barbarism* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000). See also Mario Vargas Llosa, 'El nacimiento del Perú' (April 1986), in his *Contra*

The influence of Borges on Vargas Llosa emerges most distinctively in *Los cuadernos de don Rigoberto*, a novel which examines affective attachment to culture. The novel is the sequel to *Elogio de la madrastra*, which tells the story of Rigoberto who discovers that his wife Lucrecia is having an affair with Fonchito, his child from his first marriage. *Los cuadernos de don Rigoberto* continues the story of Rigoberto and Lucrecia after their separation. The novel presents a fragmented structure, including the essays in epistolary form written by Rigoberto to express his views on a range of topics, his sexual fantasies inspired by literary works, as well as pictures and reproductions of famous paintings. Rigoberto's first essay entitled 'Instrucciones para el arquitecto' is a Borgesian manifesto that explains the principles that should guide the project for his new library to his architect: 'en ese pequeño espacio construido que llamaré mi mundo y que gobernarán mis caprichos, la primera prioridad la tendrán mis libros, cuadros y grabados; las personas seremos ciudadanos de segunda'.⁷⁶ Reminiscent of Borges, this declaration of the superiority of books, paintings and music records over human beings expresses an almost misanthropic attitude. In both *Los cuadernos de don Rigoberto* and Borges' fictions, erudition functions as a basis for the imagination. While cultural references work to the detriment of the materiality of human experience in Borges' fictional world ('lo intelectual devora y deshace siempre lo físico'), erudition allows Rigoberto to imagine and celebrate sensual experiences.⁷⁷ The ambiguous assimilation of Borges' aesthetics is signalled by the first quotation that appears in *Los cuadernos de don Rigoberto*, which is taken from Borges' 'Tres versiones de Judas': 'En el adulterio suelen participar la ternura y la abnegación'.⁷⁸ The quotation references adultery and sexuality, elements that, according to Vargas Llosa, mark a discontinuity with Borges' fiction, and ironically come from Borges himself. Through his fantasies, Rigoberto enacts the Borgesian idea of authorship, which paradoxically excludes writing. Sturrock points out that '[n]one of Borges' author-figures [...] ever writes anything down'.⁷⁹ The Borgesian idea of authorship concerns the spheres of dream and hallucination. In 'Everything and Nothing', Borges refers to Shakespeare's creations as an 'alucinación dirigida'.⁸⁰ Likewise, in *El informe de Brodie* he claims that 'la literatura no es otra cosa que un

viento y marea, III, 365–78; Mario Vargas Llosa, *Lituma en los Andes* (Barcelona: Planeta, 1993); and Mario Vargas Llosa, *La utopía arcaica* (México, D.F.: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1996).

76 Vargas Llosa, *Los cuadernos de don Rigoberto*, 16–17.

77 Vargas Llosa, 'Las ficciones de Borges', 416.

78 Vargas Llosa, *Los cuadernos de don Rigoberto*, 43. Jorge Luis Borges, 'Tres versiones de Judas' (1944), in his *Obras completas, 1923–1972*, ed. Frías, 514–18 (p. 516).

79 Sturrock, *Paper Tigers*, 41.

80 Jorge Luis Borges, 'Everything and Nothing' (1960), in his *Obras completas, 1923–1972*, ed. Frías, 803–04 (p. 803).

sueño dirigido'.⁸¹ Adopting Borges' notion of literature as a controlled dream, Vargas Llosa explores the hallucinatory states of Rigoberto and the intertextual nature of his desires. Isolation, inspiration and idealization, the three elements that Sturrock presents as a narrative paradigm of Borges' fiction, and which Vargas Llosa discusses in 'El deicidio borgeano', offer an insight into the continuity between Rigoberto and Borges' creators.⁸²

For Sturrock physical isolation is repeatedly presented as the necessary condition to authorship in Borges' stories.⁸³ Borges' creators find themselves confined in catacombs, like Tzinacán, the Mayan magician set on deciphering a tiger's stripes ('La escritura del dios'), or Don Isidro Parodi, who solves police mysteries from the depths of a Buenos Aires prison cell (*Seis problemas para don Isidro Parodi*).⁸⁴ Commenting on Sturrock's observation, Vargas Llosa writes that the physical and psychological isolation of the author are the essence of narrative creation: 'ese despegue de lo real [...] es la esencia de la creación narrativa'.⁸⁵ Rigoberto secludes himself in his library and gives life to his erotic fantasies, which are predominantly nocturnal, like Borges' stories. The library, Borges' '*locus amœnus* above all others', is the temple of Rigoberto's creative seclusion.⁸⁶

The second element that Sturrock identifies is inspiration: Borges' narrators experience a state of physical ebullience enabling them to generate fiction. When his feelings for Lucrecia are at their most intense, Rigoberto's mind becomes the stage for imaginary adulterous acts committed by his former wife and inspired by paintings, films, photos and novels. Like Borges' stories, Rigoberto's fantasies show 'the stock of existing fictions which the new maker of fictions takes as his models'.⁸⁷ In addition, Sturrock observes that the solitude of Borges' authors 'is quickly broken as the work of imagination involves them in the duplication of the selves'.⁸⁸ Duplication of the self is pivotal in Rigoberto's fantasies. In 'La noche de los gatos' Lucrecia tells Rigoberto about her erotic encounter with a faceless man. The imaginary dialogue between Lucrecia and Rigoberto is juxtaposed with Lucrecia's narration and her conversation with the faceless man. At the climax of this fantasy, Rigoberto's words resonate with the words of the faceless man: ' "Abre las piernas, amor mío" pidió el hombre

81 Jorge Luis Borges, 'Prólogo' to *El informe de Brodie* (1970), in his *Obras completas, 1923–1972*, ed. Frías, 1021–23 (p. 1022).

82 Sturrock, *Paper Tigers*, 31–76.

83 Sturrock, *Paper Tigers*, 43–44.

84 Jorge Luis Borges & Adolfo Bioy-Casares, *Seis problemas para don Isidro Parodi* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sur, 1942); Jorge Luis Borges, 'La escritura del dios', in his *Obras completas, 1923–1972*, ed. Frías, 596–99.

85 Vargas Llosa, 'El deicidio borgeano', 685.

86 Sturrock, *Paper Tigers*, 45.

87 Sturrock, *Paper Tigers*, 35.

88 Sturrock, *Paper Tigers*, 44.

sin cara. "Ábre las, ábre las" suplicó don Rigoberto'.⁸⁹ The overlapping of the two narratives shows Rigoberto's involvement in his creation: 'En silencio, su largo cuerpo aceitoso se infiltró en la imagen. Estaba ahora allí él también'.⁹⁰ Rigoberto is the creator of his fantasies and one of their protagonists at the same time. Nevertheless, when these Borgesian moments of duplication end, Rigoberto must confront the pain caused by his separation from Lucrecia.

To avoid his pain, Rigoberto creates scenarios in which he is reconciled with Lucrecia. In the fantasy of the second chapter, which is narrated in two sections entitled respectively 'El sueño de Pluto' and 'La semana ideal', Rigoberto imagines finding in his notebooks a letter addressed to Lucrecia from Pluto, a man she rejected many years before. In his letter, Pluto invites Lucrecia to spend a week with him visiting New York, Paris and Venice:

[...] *compartas conmigo esta semana ideal, acariciada en mi mente a lo largo de muchos años y que las circunstancias me permiten hacer realidad. No te arrepentirás de vivir conmigo estos siete días de ilusión y los recordarás el resto de tu vida con nostalgia.*⁹¹

Pluto's desire to turn the ideal week he has dreamt about for years into a reality is reminiscent of the third narrative paradigm Sturrock identifies: idealization. Moreover, Rigoberto's desire to abstract himself from the end of his marriage through fantasy and erudition aligns closely with Vargas Llosa's description of idealization as the process to escape reality by means of a particular use of language and literary tradition.⁹² When Lucrecia comes back from her time with Pluto, Rigoberto asks her to describe the infidelity he has imagined. The account of the nights Lucrecia and Pluto spent together satisfies Rigoberto: his wife's infidelity has become the horizon of his desire. At the same time, by making the narration of this infidelity an act of love, tenderness and abnegation as ambiguously defined by Borges, Rigoberto is attempting a symbolic reconciliation. Pluto's love for Lucrecia illuminates Rigoberto's feelings for her: "Eras para él [Pluto] algo más sutil—le explicó don Rigoberto. La irrealidad, la ilusión, la mujer de su memoria y sus deseos. Yo quiero amarte así, como él".⁹³ Rigoberto conceives of Lucrecia as the woman of his memory. Absent from his everyday life, Lucrecia reappears on the plane of illusion, becoming the fulcrum of the oscillation between the real and imaginary that Rigoberto lives within.

89 Vargas Llosa, *Los cuadernos de don Rigoberto*, 27.

90 Vargas Llosa, *Los cuadernos de don Rigoberto*, 28.

91 Vargas Llosa, *Los cuadernos de don Rigoberto*, 45; original emphasis.

92 Vargas Llosa, 'El deicidio borgeano', 686.

93 Vargas Llosa, *Los cuadernos de don Rigoberto*, 57.

Examining *Los cuadernos de don Rigoberto* in the light of Sturrock's narrative paradigm reveals its paradoxical assimilation of Borges' dynamics of creativity which intertwines erudition and eroticism. The pivotal role of eroticism evokes another major influence on Vargas Llosa, Georges Bataille. Commenting on Bataille's reverberations in *Elogio de la madrastra* and *Los cuadernos de don Rigoberto*, Roy Boland observes that 'Vargas Llosa's engagement with Bataille's ideas represents the most significant intellectual layer in his erotic novels, which take up the dictum that "Sex is good for thought" propagated by eighteenth-century libertine writers'.⁹⁴ Celebrating the intellectual power of eroticism and the works of art it inspires, Vargas Llosa reconciles the influences of Borges and Bataille and articulates a criticism of the pleasures of unreality in which Borges revels. While works such as *La guerra del fin del mundo* and *Historia de Mayta* explore the dangers of interpreting social and historical events through political fictions and abstractions, *Los cuadernos de don Rigoberto* addresses the emotional implications of taking refuge in fictions.⁹⁵ Indulging in his fantasies, Rigoberto alienates himself even from his son, until he finds his notes on Patricia Highsmith's *Edith's Diary* (1977) and Juan Carlos Onetti's *La vida breve* (1950), both of which feature characters who create fictional versions of their lives to avoid their pain. Learning from Edith Howland's and Juan María Brausen's experiences of alienation respectively, Rigoberto realizes the risks of sheltering in his fantasies. Evoking Calderón de la Barca's *La vida es sueño* (1635), he rejects the notion of life as a dream:

[...] los sueños eran una endeble mentira, un embeleco fugaz que sólo servía para escapar transitoriamente de las frustraciones y la soledad, y para apreciar mejor, con más dolorosa amargura, lo hermosa y sustancial que era la vida verdadera, [...] tan superior y plena comparada al simulacro que mimaban, conjurados, los deseos y la fantasía.⁹⁶

At the end of the novel Rigoberto sees through the fascination of unreality and aims to re-establish his connection with the world and with Lucrecia. By creating a Borgesian character such as Rigoberto, Vargas Llosa

94 Roy Boland, 'The Erotic Novels: *In Praise of the Stepmother* and *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto*', in *The Cambridge Companion to Mario Vargas Llosa*, ed. Kristal & King, 102–15.

95 See Debra A. Castillo, 'The Uses of History in Vargas Llosa's *Historia de Mayta*', *INTI. Revista de Literatura Hispánica*, 24 (1986), 79–98; Kristal, *Temptation of the Word*; and Seymour Menton, 'La guerra contra el fanatismo de Mario Vargas Llosa', in *Actas del X Congreso de la Asociación Internacional de Hispanistas. Barcelona, 21–26 de agosto de 1989* (Barcelona: Promociones y Publicaciones Universitarias, 1992), 811–17. See also Mario Vargas Llosa, *Historia de Mayta* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1984).

96 Vargas Llosa, *Los cuadernos de don Rigoberto*, 352.

articulates a metaliterary reflection on the Cervantine theme of the influence of literature on life. As Vargas Llosa writes in an essay dedicated to *Don Quixote*, 'lo que parece a muchos lectores modernos el tema "borgiano" por antonomasia—el de "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius"—es, en verdad, un tema cervantino que, siglos después, Borges resucitó, imprimiéndole un sello personal'.⁹⁷ This theme not only connects the narratives of Cervantes and Borges but is also key to understanding Vargas Llosa's reading of Borges' life.

In his foreword to *A Dictionary of Borges*, Vargas Llosa compares Borges to the strange sect of his 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius' because of his attempt to interpolate a fictitious universe in everyday life.⁹⁸ In 'Las ficciones de Borges' Vargas Llosa reminds the reader of Borges' words to Luis Harss: "Estoy podrido de literatura".⁹⁹ As is the case for his characters, so too for Borges did literature represent an alternative life that prevailed over his everyday experience: "Pocas cosas me han ocurrido y muchas he leído".¹⁰⁰ Symptomatic of this process, the alleged absence of sex in Borges' fiction could be read as an expression of his romantic struggles and his avoidance of physical love: 'Se diría que era el juego de sombras lo que le atraía en el amor, no concretarlo', writes Vargas Llosa in 'El viaje en globo'.¹⁰¹ In this text, Vargas Llosa discusses his discovery of one of Borges' last works, *Atlas*, a collection of the notes he wrote between the ages of eighty-three and eighty-five about his trips around the world with María Kodama.¹⁰² Seeing how the emotions emerge in *Atlas*, Vargas Llosa draws on Edwin Williamson's *Borges: A Life* and emphasizes the emotional trauma Borges lived as a young man when his father tried to initiate him into sex by arranging a meeting with a prostitute in Lugano in 1918.¹⁰³ The unsuccessful encounter apparently haunted Borges for years, as he mentions in an unpublished poem written in approximately 1940: 'Or perhaps I have died: [...] twenty years ago in a venal bedroom in the heart

97 Mario Vargas Llosa, 'Una novela para el siglo XXI', in Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quijote de la Mancha*, ed. & notas de Francisco Rico, con estudios de Mario Vargas Llosa et al. (Madrid: Real Academia Española, 2004), xiii–xxviii (p. xv).

98 Mario Vargas Llosa, 'Foreword', in *A Dictionary of Borges*, ed. Evelyn Fishburn & Psiche Hughes, forewords by Mario Vargas Llosa & Anthony Burgess (London: Duckworth, 1990), ix. See also Jorge Luis Borges, 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius' (1941), in his *Obras completas, 1923–1972*, ed. Frías, 431–43.

99 Luis Harss, con la colaboración de Barbara Dohmann, *Los nuestros* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1966), 128.

100 Harss, con la colaboración de Dohmann, *Los nuestros*, 128.

101 Vargas Llosa, 'El viaje en globo', n.p. (see above, note 1). For a description of platonic love in Borges, see Humberto Núñez-Faraco, *Borges and Dante: Echoes of a Literary Friendship* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2006) and, by the same author, 'La dimensión afectiva en la poesía juvenile de J. L. Borges', *Neophilologus*, 95:2 (2011), 235–47.

102 Jorge Luis Borges, con la colaboración de María Kodama, *Atlas* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1984).

103 Williamson, *Borges: A Life*, 64–66.

of Europe'.¹⁰⁴ Borges suffered self-punishing shame and developed the idea that carnal desire was associated with degradation and humiliation.¹⁰⁵ For Vargas Llosa the echoes of this trauma continued until Borges met María Kodama with whom he was able to experience intimacy for the first time: '[María] le hizo descubrir que la vida y los sentidos podían ser tanto o más excitantes que las aporías de Zenón, la filosofía de Schopenhauer, la máquina de pensar de Raimundo Lulio o la poesía de William Blake'.¹⁰⁶ For Vargas Llosa this new awareness is expressed in *Los conjurados*, Borges' last collection of poems in which physical love appears as an enriching experience.¹⁰⁷ Inspired by Borges' fascination with unreality, *Los cuadernos de don Rigoberto* configures a reconciliation with emotions and desires that Vargas Llosa did not know had already happened in Borges' life. In the next section, drawing on Rigoberto's essays, I will discuss the political affinities between Vargas Llosa and Borges and will explore the ways in which the Argentinian emerges as a means of looking at Latin America in Vargas Llosa's most recent writings.

4 Borges' Cosmopolitanism: A Value for a Globalized Civilization

After his political defeat in the Peruvian presidential elections in 1990, Vargas Llosa withdrew from direct participation in political life and mainly expressed his views as a newspaper columnist. Rigoberto's essay-letters ironically hint at Vargas Llosa's opinions.¹⁰⁸ I suggest Rigoberto's letters also address a series of themes which Vargas Llosa discusses in 'Borges, político'.

Drawing on a collection of Borges' texts published in the magazine *Sur*, later published as the edited collection *Borges en 'Sur' (1931–1980)*, Vargas Llosa describes Borges as 'un individualista recalcitrante, constitutivamente alérgico a ceder un ápice de su independencia y a disolverla en lo gregario'.¹⁰⁹ Borges' notion of individualism is expressed in 'Nuestro pobre individualismo': 'El más urgente de los problemas de nuestra época [...] es la gradual intromisión del Estado en los actos del

104 Donald A. Yates, 'Behind Borges and I', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 19:3 (1973), 317–24 (p. 323).

105 Williamson, *Borges: A Life*, 66.

106 Vargas Llosa, 'El viaje en globo', n.p.

107 Jorge Luis Borges, *Los conjurados* (1985), in his *Obras completas*, ed. Frías, III, 451–501.

108 See Kristal, *Temptation of the Word*, 179; Sabine Köllmann, 'Vargas Llosa's Self-Definition As "The Man Who Writes and Thinks"', in *Vargas Llosa and Latin American Politics*, ed. De Castro & Birns, 173–88 (p. 182).

109 Vargas Llosa, 'Borges, político', 24–25. See also Jorge Luis Borges, *Borges en 'Sur' 1931–1980*, ed. Sara Luisa del Carril & Mercedes Rubio de Socchi (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1999).

individuo'.¹¹⁰ Likewise, Rigoberto believes that social phenomena, including patriotism, ideology and religion, lead to the loss of freedom and individuality, reducing the subject to the condition of 'mass-man':

[...] todo movimiento que pretenda trascender [...] el combate por la soberanía individual, anteponiéndole los intereses de un colectivo—clase, raza, género, nación, sexo, etnia, iglesia, vicio o profesión—me parece una conjura para embridar aún más la maltratada libertad humana.¹¹¹

The forms of individualism that Borges and Rigoberto defend differ as Borges defined himself as 'un modesto anarquista en una manera espencierana'.¹¹² While Vargas Llosa is dismissive of this label, Alejandra Salinas argues that Herbert Spencer is crucial in understanding Borges' individualism.¹¹³ For Borges, anarchy is a self-organized order built on the pacific co-existence of self-sufficient and self-restrained individuals as illustrated by his tales 'Utopía de un hombre que está cansado' and 'El soborno'.¹¹⁴ In contrast, Rigoberto's fierce defence of individual freedom is nourished by liberal ideology. Reminiscent of the Marquis de Sade and Bataille, he conceives of pleasure as a liberating principle.¹¹⁵ As a hyperbolic representation of Vargas Llosa's focus on sexuality, Rigoberto's hedonistic individualism contrasts with Borges' ideal of self-restrained and self-sufficient individualism, exemplifying the paradoxical proximity between Borges and Rigoberto.

Los cuadernos de don Rigoberto denounces the dangerous liaison between patriotism and nationalism, evoking Borges' rejection of nationalism that Vargas Llosa underlines in 'Borges, político'. Although Borges' antifascist stance has been widely discussed, Vargas Llosa offers an insight into the contradiction between Borges' opposition to Nazism and Fascism and his support for the military uprisings led in Argentina by Eduardo Leonardi

110 Jorge Luis Borges, 'Nuestro pobre individualismo' (1946), in his *Obras completas, 1923–1972*, ed. Frías, 658–59 (p. 659).

111 Vargas Llosa, *Los cuadernos de don Rigoberto*, 87.

112 Televisión Pública, 'Celebrando a Borges—1980. A fondo: entrevista de Joaquín Soler Serrano (1 de 4)', YouTube Video, 19 June 2016; <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U-GlQZujLqw>> (accessed 18 June 2021).

113 Alejandra Salinas, 'Political Philosophy in Borges: Fallibility, Liberal Anarchism, and Civic Ethics', *The Review of Politics*, 72 (2010), 299–324.

114 Jorge Luis Borges, 'Utopía de un hombre que está cansado' (1975) and Jorge Luis Borges, 'El soborno' (1975), both in his *Obras completas*, ed. Frías, III, 52–56 & 57–61 respectively.

115 Roger Zapata, 'Ficción, ideología y erotismo en dos novelas de Vargas Llosa', in *Me gustas cuando callas ...: los escritores del 'Boom' y el género sexual*, ed. Ana Luisa Sierra (San Juan: Editorial de la Univ. de Puerto Rico, 2002), 211–31 (pp. 227–28).

and Videla.¹¹⁶ According to Vargas Llosa, Borges' support for Leonardí's military uprising that ended the second presidency of Perón in 1955 could be understood in view of his strong opposition to Perón, who Borges erroneously associated with Nazism and considered a pure expression of evil.¹¹⁷ However, Vargas Llosa finds Borges' initial enthusiasm for the dictatorship of Videla, which ended the government of Isabel Perón, incomprehensible.¹¹⁸ Borges' overdue criticism of Videla's military dictatorship cannot counteract his initial enthusiasm for it.¹¹⁹ In Vargas Llosa's eyes this contradiction depends on Borges' view of Latin America as a territory still too distant from European civilization and, therefore, not entitled to democratic forms of government. In his eulogy for Macedonio Fernández, Borges said: 'La República Argentina me pareció un territorio insípido, que no era, ya, la pintoresca barbarie y que aún no era la cultura'.¹²⁰ The dichotomy between Europe and Argentina that Vargas Llosa underlines also characterizes Borges' description of his fellow Argentinians: 'El argentino, a diferencia de los americanos del Norte y de casi todos los europeos, no se identifica con el Estado [...] lo cierto es que el argentino es un individuo, no un ciudadano'.¹²¹

As in the case of his observations about ethnocentrism, some of Vargas Llosa's writings display the same sense of dichotomy between Europe and Latin America that he recognizes in Borges. In 'Borges y los piqueteros', Vargas Llosa refers to the myth that in 1946 Borges was dismissed from his job at the Miguel Cané library and appointed municipal inspector of poultry for his anti-Peronism:

El hecho es todo un símbolo del proceso de barbarización política que latinoamericanizaría a Argentina y revelaría a los argentinos al cabo de los años que, en verdad, no eran lo que muchos de ellos creían ser—ciudadanos de un país europeo, culto, civilizado y democrático, enclavado por accidente en Sudamérica—sino, ay, nada más que otra nación del tercer mundo subdesarrollado e incivil.¹²²

116 See González, *Borges and the Politics of Form*, 169–99; Annick Louis, *Borges ante el fascismo* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2007); and Rodríguez Monegal, 'Borges and Politics', trans. Santi & Alonso, 55–69.

117 Rodríguez Monegal, 'Borges and Politics', trans. Santi & Alonso, 64. See also Jorge Panesi, 'Borges y el peronismo', in *El peronismo clásico (1945–1955): descamisados, gorilas y contreras*, ed. David Viñas, Gabriela García Cedro & Guillermo Korn (Buenos Aires: Paradiso, 2007), 30–41 (p. 32).

118 Vargas Llosa, 'Borges, político', 25.

119 Borges admits his support for Videla was a mistake in an interview with María Esther Vázquez, in her *Borges: sus días y su tiempo* (Buenos Aires: Javier Vergara, 1999), 229–42.

120 Jorge Luis Borges, 'Macedonio Fernández (1874–1952)' (1952), in *Borges en 'Sur' 1931–1980*, ed. Carril & Rubio de Socchi, 305–07 (p. 306).

121 Borges, 'Nuestro pobre individualismo', 658.

122 Mario Vargas Llosa, 'Borges y los piqueteros' (April 2008), in *Obras completas*, ed. Munné-Jordà, XI, *Piedra de toque III (2000–2012)*, 1052–55 (p. 1053).

Referring to 'Latin America' to express a process of socio-political regression betrays a colonial view in contrast with Vargas Llosa's acknowledgement of the ways of life in Argentina and in other Latin-American countries such as Uruguay in the 1930s.¹²³ Likewise, reductionism affects his description of the Argentinian protest movement known as the *piqueteros*. Vargas Llosa recalls that the bus on which he was travelling when headed to Rosario's 'Instituto Libertad' to celebrate its twentieth anniversary was attacked by a group of 'piqueteros' who are described as a 'horda de salvaje'.¹²⁴ Resonating with the opposition between civilization and barbarism Borges evokes in 'Poema conjetural'—'Vencen los bárbaros, los gauchos vencen', the *piqueteros* are presented as emblematic of the populism and demagoguery characterizing Kirchners' Argentina and in opposition to the civilization that Borges personifies:¹²⁵

[...] una nación entera que, poco a poco, renuncia a todo lo que hizo de ella un país del primer mundo—la democracia, la economía de mercado, su integración al resto del globo, las instituciones civiles, la cultura de brazos abiertos—para, obnubilada por el populismo, la demagogia, el autoritarismo, la dictadura y el delirio mesiánico, empobrecerse, dividirse, ensangrentarse, provincianizarse, y, en resumidas cuentas, pasar de Jorge Luis Borges a los piqueteros.¹²⁶

As a symbol of a democratic and (neo-)liberal civilization, Borges is set in opposition to the barbarism that the *piqueteros* embody. Juan De Castro suggests that the dichotomy between civilization and barbarism characteristic of Vargas Llosa's description of indigenous culture is also the frame through which he reads social struggles in Argentina.¹²⁷ The reductionism of this approach is confirmed by the description of the *piqueteros* as a cohesive collective, a term that captures the heterogenous phenomenon characterized by different trends and formations.¹²⁸ Most

123 Vargas Llosa, 'Borges y los piqueteros', 1055. See also Mario Vargas Llosa, *El viaje a la ficción. El mundo de Juan Carlos Onetti* (Madrid: Alfaguara, 2008), 156–58.

124 Vargas Llosa, 'Borges y los piqueteros', 1055.

125 Jorge Luis Borges, 'Poema conjetural' (1943), in his *Obras completas, 1923–1972*, ed. Frías, 867–68. Vargas Llosa strongly criticized Néstor and Cristina Kirchner in his article '¡Flor de pareja!' (2009), in *Obras completas*, ed. Munné-Jordà, XI, *Piedra de toque III (2000–2012)*, 1196–99.

126 Vargas Llosa, 'Borges y los piqueteros', 1054.

127 De Castro, 'Mario Vargas Llosa Versus Barbarism'.

128 Maristella Svampa, 'Argentina: la reconfiguración del espacio piquetero (2003–2009)', in *Entre la ruta y el barrio: la experiencia de las organizaciones piqueteras*, ed. Maristella Svampa & Sebastián Pereyra (Buenos Aires: Biblos, 2009); Maristella Svampa & Sebastián Pereyra, 'La política de los movimientos piqueteros', in *Tomar la palabra: estudios sobre protesta social y acción colectiva en la Argentina contemporánea*, ed. Federico L. Schuster et al. (Buenos Aires: Prometeo, 2005), 343–64.

significantly, Vargas Llosa overlooks the fact that these protest movements arose as a reaction to the growing social differences generated by the Argentine financial crisis of 1998–2002 and the liberal economic models that Argentine governments adopted.

Vargas Llosa's readings of Borges inform his interpretation of the Argentine financial crisis. In his article '¿Por qué? ¿Cómo?', commenting on the election of Eduardo Duhalde, the fifth President of Argentina over two weeks between 2001 and 2002, Vargas Llosa proposes Barrenechea's *La expresión de la irrealidad en la obra de Jorge Luis Borges* as a crucial text to understand the psychological attitude that induced Argentinians to ignore the gravity of their national financial situation and to choose political fictions of demagoguery and populism over the pragmatism of the restructuring of the national debt: 'Dejarse acumular una deuda externa de 130 mil millones de dólares es vivir una ficción suicida'.¹²⁹ This reading of the Argentine financial crisis is evocative of Vargas Llosa's stance on Latin-American psychology: 'Los latinoamericanos difícilmente nos resignamos a aceptar que esa cosa tan aburrida y mediocre—el sentido común—puede ser una virtud política, y, entre realidad e irrealidad, preferimos esta última, más fulgurante que aquella, tan pedestre'.¹³⁰ For Vargas Llosa the temptation to embrace fictions over life is productive in literature, as Borges' writing exemplifies, but has terrible effects when translated into politics. The same might be argued about Vargas Llosa's study of the influence of life on literature, which is insightful when it examines Borges' relationship with culture, but reductionist in offering a portrait of mass psychology and macroeconomic phenomena.

Besides these contradictions, the dichotomy between Borges and the *piqueteros* deserves further discussion as it conflates Borges' literature and an economic and political process he did not endorse. Although Borges opposed Perón's populism in both Argentina and dictatorships in Europe, he was not sympathetic to democratic processes in Latin America. He was a liberal as he believed the State should not interfere with citizens' private lives, but he did not express his opinions on a global market economy.¹³¹ The reason for this conflation may be found in Vargas Llosa's idea that culture, democracy and globalization are interconnected. For Vargas Llosa a national culture can grow only in co-dependency with other cultures and a fair co-existence of different cultures is possible only within democratic societies.¹³² In his eyes, the most exemplary case is the United States:

129 Mario Vargas Llosa, '¿Por qué? ¿Cómo?' (January 2002), in *Obras completas*, ed. Munné-Jordà, XI, *Piedra de toque III (2000–2012)*, 247–51 (p. 249).

130 Mario Vargas Llosa, 'Sirenas en el Amazonas' (December 1998), in *Obras completas*, ed. Munné-Jordà, X, *Piedra de toque II (1984–1999)*, 1287–93 (p. 1292).

131 González, *Borges and the Politics of Form*, 186.

132 Mario Vargas Llosa, 'El elefante y la cultura' (November 1981), in his *Contra viento y marea*, II, (1972–1983), 313–22 (p. 316).

[...] esa formidable mezcla de razas, culturas, tradiciones, costumbres, que aquí consiguen convivir sin entremetarse, gracias a esa igualdad ante la ley y la flexibilidad del sistema para dar cabida en su seno a la diversidad, dentro del denominador común del respecto de la ley.¹³³

In articles dedicated to globalization, such as 'El elefante y la cultura' and 'Las culturas y la globalización', Vargas Llosa underlines that intercultural exchange is promoted by democratic and technological advancement but hindered by growing nationalistic feelings and populism.¹³⁴ He praises the rejection of nationalism expressed by Borges, who wrote 'Yo abomino del nacionalismo que es un mal de época, deberíamos sentir todo el mundo como nuestra patria'.¹³⁵ For Vargas Llosa Borges' writing proves that a culture can only benefit from its connection with other cultures: 'Borges es un diáfano ejemplo de cómo la mejor manera de enriquecer con una obra original la cultura de la nación en que uno ha nacido y el idioma en el que escribe es siendo, culturalmente, un ciudadano del mundo'.¹³⁶ Borges' transnational humanism should inspire democratic societies to embrace cosmopolitanism and all of its cultural and economic implications. Even after his death, Borges continues to be an emblem of anti-nationalism. In his article 'Farsa elogiosa repugnante', Vargas Llosa comments on the withdrawal of a Bill moved by nationalistic feelings to repatriate Borges' remains that lie in Geneva.¹³⁷ Observing that Cristina Kirchner's government embodies the types of populism and demagoguery that Borges rejected, Vargas Llosa stresses that Borges consciously chose to die in Switzerland where his intellectual life started and claims that he is not only a patrimony of Argentinians, but of anyone who could read him. In his later work Vargas Llosa finds the political meaning of Borges' fiction in its inclusivity. Although it represents an intellectual challenge even to engaged readers, Borges' erudition is deeply democratic and cosmopolitan. It opens up his readers' imagination to other cultures regardless of their geographical origins or the languages which express them.

133 Vargas Llosa, 'Confesiones de un liberal', 45.

134 Mario Vargas Llosa, 'Las culturas y la globalización', *El País*, 15 April 2000, n.p.; available at <https://elpais.com/diario/2000/04/16/opinion/955836005_850215.html> (accessed 19 June 2021).

135 Jorge Luis Borges, 'Homenaje a Victoria Ocampo' (1980), in *Borges en 'Sur' 1931-1980*, ed. Carril & Rubio de Socchi, 326-31 (p. 327). Vargas Llosa quotes this sentence in 'Borges, político', 25.

136 Mario Vargas Llosa, 'El elefante y la cultura', 317.

137 Mario Vargas Llosa, 'Farsa elogiosa repugnante' (February 2009), in *Obras completas*, ed. Munné-Jordà, XI, *Piedra de toque III (2000-2012)*, 1150-54.

5 Conclusion

The study of Borges' reception by Vargas Llosa offers a unique standpoint from which to address the interconnectedness of political beliefs and literary theory, personal life and fiction in Vargas Llosa's own writing. The strength of Vargas Llosa's earliest political readings and his most recent interpretations of Borges is questionable. His initial rejection of Borges for political reasons overlooked the complexity of the Argentinian's political history as a marginal writer with anarchist ideas who opposed Nazism, Fascism and Peronism, seen in works such as 'La fiesta del monstruo' and 'El milagro secreto'. On the other hand, his late fetishization of Borges as a symbol of liberal democracy conflates Borges' literature with Vargas Llosa's own (neo-)liberal idea that culture, democracy and globalization are mutually interconnected, whilst offering a reductionist interpretation of Argentina's socio-economic and political struggles. These political readings show how even an accomplished writer such as Vargas Llosa had difficulties in engaging with Borges' immensely rich bibliography. Revealing a degree of political bias, they are evocative of a sentence that Vargas Llosa once wrote about Borges: 'No es verdad que la obra de un escritor pueda abstraerse por completo de sus ideas políticas, de sus creencias, de sus fobias y filias éticas y sociales'.¹³⁸ However, although his juvenile and mature stances on Borges might appear antithetical at first, they are more similar than the ideological distance between them suggests. Both Vargas Llosa's desire for social justice as a passionate young man, and his search for a literary symbol of intercultural dialogue during the rise of nationalism and populism as a mature writer, are expressions of the civic commitment underlying his writing throughout his career.

Although the different ways in which he evokes the figure of Borges reveal the tensions that have characterized Vargas Llosa's own political and personal path, in this article I have suggested that these inflections should be discussed in light of his theoretical and literary endeavours. I would like thus to return to the notion of individualism in *Los cuadernos de don Rigoberto*, underlining the protagonist's hedonistic libertarianism and affective attachment to literature as a site from which to explore how the literary and the political are not always discernible in Vargas Llosa's writing. Reminiscent of Borges' intellectualism, Rigoberto's individualism is imbued with literary, philosophical and cultural references. Embodying the ideal of a cosmopolitan reader, Rigoberto epitomizes those attributes that Vargas Llosa would project on Borges as a symbol of a multicultural society in opposition to nationalism. Symptomatic of Vargas Llosa's political transition, individualism emerges as a literary theme and is set in dialogue with the most literary of literary *motifs*: the Quixotic tension

138 Vargas Llosa, 'Borges, político', 26.

between fiction and lived experience. The criticism of the pleasures of 'unreality' that *Los cuadernos de don Rigoberto* articulates not only connects Rigoberto with Vargas Llosa's reading of Borges, but also to Don Quixote, as well as to a genealogy of characters whose lives are influenced by literature such as Edith and Brausen. The case of the latter deserves more attention since in the long essay dedicated to Onetti, published eleven years after *Los cuadernos de don Rigoberto*, *El viaje a la ficción*, Vargas Llosa examines the echoes of Borges' 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius' and 'Las ruinas circulares' on Brausen's attempt to interpolate fiction into lived experience in *La vida breve*.¹³⁹ Diverging from Vargas Llosa's previous works such as *La guerra de la fin del mundo* and *Historia de Mayta*, which explore the dangers of interpreting social and historical events through political fictions and abstractions, *Los cuadernos de don Rigoberto* examines affective attachment to literature and the emotional implications of taking refuge in fictions. Unlike Quixote and Brausen, Rigoberto recognizes the damaging effects of literature on his life and does so before it is too late, as he moves to re-establish the relationship with his wife. This violation of the Quixotic script articulates Vargas Llosa's stance on the Cervantine theme as well as his reading of Borges' writing as an aesthetic project aimed at replacing lived experience with fiction. Vargas Llosa denounces the perils and the pleasures of private, consolatory fictions just as he did in the past with the dangers of political fictions, shedding light on the risk of uncritically embracing narrative frames through which to interpret either private or public experiences. More than representing a narrative transposition of a political stance or a thematic rupture, *Los cuadernos de don Rigoberto* integrates and expands the examination of the influence of fiction away from the public sphere and political arena. Echoing the paradox of Vargas Llosa's literary works, fictions that invite their readers to mistrust the effects of fictions on their lives, his engagement with Borges represents an appeal to the individual to preserve their autonomy and clarity of judgment, whilst sharing the inexhaustible intellectual pleasure of reading Borges.¹⁴⁰

139 Vargas Llosa, *El viaje a la ficción*, 102–07.

140 Vargas Llosa, *Un demi-siècle avec Borges*, trad. Bensoussan, 7.

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