

# Power, Will and Freedom: Mario Vargas Llosa's *The Feast of the Goat*

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## Summary

This article seeks to explore and elucidate the liberal values and principles underpinning Mario Vargas Llosa's work by offering a careful reading of his recent novel, *The Feast of the Goat* (2000). Having critically examined in several of his earlier novels what he regards as the inevitable destructiveness of socialist utopianism, Vargas Llosa turns his attention in *The Feast of the Goat* to the equally destructive force of right-wing authoritarianism, manifested in this case by the brutal thirty-one-year dictatorship of the Dominican Republic's Rafael Leonidas Trujillo. Unlike other versions of the so-called Latin American dictator novel, which tended to utilise allegorical and even magic-realist techniques, *The Feast of the Goat* focuses in meticulously researched historical detail upon the very real figure of Trujillo in order to consider the tensions between the eternally antagonistic human aspirations of power and freedom. While providing a vivid if harrowing account of the dictator's grim tyranny and corruption, the novel goes on to reveal, more pertinently perhaps, how people are all too often and too easily prepared to forfeit their liberty for some other putative social or economic good, only to find themselves becoming complicit, voluntarily or otherwise, in their own oppression. Finally, through the characters of a number of Trujillo's victims, as well as his eventual assassins, the novel presents an alternative vision of a truly free and open society.

## Opsomming

Hierdie artikel poog om die liberale waardes en beginsels wat Mario Vargas Llosa se werk onderlê te ondersoek en duidelik te maak, deur 'n omsigtige lees van sy roman, *The Feast of the Goat* (2000). Hy het in vroeëre romans wat hy beskou as die onvermydelike destruktiewe krag van utopiese sosialisme krities eksamineer, en nou gee hy aandag aan die eweneens destruktiewe krag van verregse konserwatisme, daargestel in die brutale een-en-dertig jaar diktatorskap van die Dominikaanse Republiek se Rafael Leonidas Trujillo. Ander voorbeelde van die sogenaamde Latyns-Amerikaanse diktatorroman het gebruik gemaak van die tegnieke van allegoriese en magies-realistiese tegnieke, maar *The Feast of the Goat* fokus in nougesette geskiedkundige detail op die werklike figuur Trujillo om die spanning tussen die ewigduurende antagonistiese menslike aspirasies van krag en vryheid te te bedink. Alhoewel die roman 'n duidelike dog kwellende verslag van die diktator se wrede tirannie en korrupsie lewer, openbaar die roman ook, meer pertinent miskien, hoe mense al te dikwels en al te maklik bereid is om hul vryheid vir een of ander vermeende sosiale of ekonomiese welsyn te verbeur, en hoe hulle dan medepligtig is, hetsy vrywillig of andersinds, aan hulle eie onderdrukking. Uiteindelik, deur die karakters van verskeie van Trujillo se slagoffers, sowel as sy eventuele sluip-

moordenaars, bied die roman 'n alternatiewe visie van 'n ware vry en oop samelewing.

## Introduction

Mario Vargas Llosa is that rarity in contemporary Latin American literature, a writer who not only embodies liberal values in his novels, but also one who has, over the past thirty years or so, openly, consistently and resolutely championed the cause of liberal democracy in his non-fictional writing. As a self-professed liberal (or “self-confessed”, as he wryly put it in a 2005 essay), he has been subjected to a great deal of adverse criticism, particularly in relation to those of his novels which have presented an antagonistic view of socialist ideology, and particularly by left-wing writers and critics, who have variously and inaccurately labelled him “conservative” (Martin 1987: 227), “the new darling of the Right” (Standish 1990: 161), and “neo-liberal” (Moses 2002: 1).

The purpose of this article is to offer a more sympathetic assessment of Vargas Llosa’s work, on its own terms, by clarifying and explicating the liberal principles underlying it, through a detailed study of his recent novel, *The Feast of the Goat* (2000).<sup>1</sup> In this text, he turns his critical scrutiny away from what he regards as the inevitable destructiveness of socialist utopianism to focus upon the equally destructive nature of right-wing authoritarianism, manifested in this case by the grim thirty-one-year dictatorship of the Dominican Republic’s Rafael Leonidas Trujillo. The article will begin by briefly tracing the political evolution of Vargas Llosa’s thought as a liberal, before turning to a careful consideration of the novel itself. In this reading of the novel, the aim is neither to evaluate the historiographical fidelity of the text nor to investigate the mimetic processes of the narrative – however interesting these concerns may be, they are the subject matter of a different kind of study. Instead, this article will concentrate primarily on the novel’s exploration of the conflict between authoritarianism and liberalism, and, more particularly, between the will to power of the tyrant and the free will of the people, in terms both of democratic practice and of individual liberty. In so doing, it is hoped that the wider political relevance and significance of the novel will become clear.

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1. Dates given are those of the original Spanish publications, rather than those of the English translations.

## Background

The biographical details of Mario Vargas Llosa's extremely full and eventful life as a novelist, journalist, essayist, politician and social commentator have frequently been documented and need not be recounted here (see, for example, Guerdes 1985; Castro-Kláren 1990; O'Brien-Knight 1995; Williams 2001). Nevertheless, three pivotal moments, which have a direct bearing on *The Feast of the Goat* and which are therefore worth relating, stand out in his ideological development. The first concerns his hatred of the violent, disciplinarian excesses of his father (whom he met for the first time only when he was ten years old) and his hellish experiences at the Leoncio Prado military academy in Lima, which nevertheless provided him with a special insight into the brutality and prejudice of party-coloured Peruvian society under General Odría's 1948-1956 military rule. This upbringing served to instil in him a lifelong aversion to the seemingly endemic corruption, machismo and authoritarianism, which have over the years characterised so much of Latin American culture. It is precisely these themes which form the subject matter of his early novels, such as *The Time of the Hero* (1962), which propelled him into the very forefront of the so-called "boom" in Latin American literature in the 1960s along with Gabriel García Márquez, Carlos Fuentes and Julio Cortázar.

Secondly, his growing disenchantment with socialism was finally confirmed in 1971 when Fidel Castro, who had been inexorably entrenching his dictatorial rule, subjected the dissident Cuban poet, Heberto Padilla, to a shameful "show trial" before imprisoning him. Vargas Llosa was at the head of a group of writers who wrote a powerful letter of protest against this breach of the fundamental right to freedom of expression. Castro's reaction was to harden Cuban cultural policy even further, to denounce the protesting writers, and to demand that they publicly apologise. Vargas Llosa, characteristically, held his ground defiantly, but was so outraged that many of the writers, including Márquez and Cortázar, did indeed recant and reconfirm their support for the Cuban regime that he broke off relations with them, in the process famously labelling Márquez "Castro's courtesan". (Their long-term friendship finally ended once and for all in a fistfight in a Mexico City cinema in 1975.) Vargas Llosa's break with the intellectual Left also saw a significant shift in his literary emphases. Moving away from the politically earnest forms of his early texts, he reacknowledged "the secret, sinful passion" (Vargas Llosa 1991: 3) he had always harboured for the work of writers like Jorge Luis Borges, and composed a series of irresistibly humorous and/or erotic novels, including *Captain Pantoja and the Special Service* (1973), *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* (1977), based on

his actual elopement with, and marriage to, his aunt Julia Urquidi Illanes, when he was eighteen,<sup>2</sup> and *In Praise of the Stepmother* (1988).

Vargas Llosa is by his very nature political, however, and so it was perhaps inevitable that he should be drawn into the arena of political activism in the third of his key developmental moments. Returning to Lima in 1974 after a sixteen-year sojourn in Europe, he soon became concerned about the dangerous political extremism in Latin America from both the Right and the Left. As president of the writers' club International PEN in 1977, for example, he wrote an open letter denouncing the Argentine dictator Jorge Videla. At the other end of the spectrum, he became increasingly alarmed at the emergence of violent socialist movements such as Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path) in his native Peru.<sup>3</sup> In response to this extremism, Vargas Llosa decided to run for the presidency of Peru in 1990. He was ultimately defeated by the subsequent dictator, Alberto Fujimori, but, as his 1993 memoir, *A Fish in the Water*, makes clear, Vargas Llosa was embittered not so much by his loss as by the disturbing fact that his countrymen had once again chosen an authoritarian figure over a liberal democrat. For Vargas Llosa, though he has continued to interest himself in politics, he has never again sought public office; as he puts it, "I learned I'm not a politician but a writer" (in Jaggi 2002: 30).

As a writer, however, politics has returned as an important, even obsessive focus in his fiction. In his own literary theory,<sup>4</sup> Vargas Llosa has frequently adverted to the "demons" which drive an author to write, and as Sabine Köllman (2002: 1) has noted, in the case of Mario Vargas Llosa "politics is one of the most persistent 'demons' which ... provoke his creativity". In the wake of his resilement from the Left, then, he produced a number of novels exploring and exposing the destructive idealism of revolutionary socialism, which might begin with a millenarian vision of a perfect society but which invariably ends with dictatorial oppression, enforced conformism, the denial of human rights, and social and economic devastation. It was this series of novels, *The War of the End of the World* (1981), *The Real Life of Alejandro Mayta* (1984), *Death in the Andes*

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2. They eventually divorced in 1964, and he subsequently married his cousin, Patricia Llosa, with whom he has three children. Julia Urquidi's response to the novel was a lawsuit and her own memoir of the experience, *Lo que Varguitas no dijo (What Varguitas Did Not Say)* (1983). She might have done well to recall Varguitas's own account of a writer's fictional recreation of reality in *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* (see 1977: 250).

3. For a recent retrospective on this movement, see Carroll 2007: 20.

4. Vargas Llosa has produced numerous literary critical and theoretical works, including influential studies of his one-time friend Garcia Marquez, and of Flaubert.

(1993a), and more recently *The Way to Paradise* (2003a), which incurred the wrath of left-wing critics and fellow writers, and led to Vargas Llosa being reviled as a reactionary conservative.

And yet, for anyone who has read Vargas Llosa's work over the past several decades, his political position is quite clear. He is a writer who is opposed to the anti-individual tyranny of both right-wing nationalism and left-wing collectivism, and who believes resolutely in the core values and rights of liberal democracy. Far from being a conservative or what Michael Valdez Moses has floridly if misleadingly termed "the eminence grise of Latin American neoliberalism" (2002: 1),<sup>5</sup> he is, by his own definition, a classical liberal who upholds "the basic precepts of liberalism – political democracy, the market economy, and the defense of individual interests over those of the state" (2005: 3). It is this fundamental belief in the principle of individual liberty and autonomy which distinguishes Vargas Llosa's thought from that of both the Right and the Left, and which gives his work its distinctive quality. Having explored the damage wrought by utopian socialism in a number of his novels, then, he turns his attention to the similarly damaging effect of authoritarian extremism in *The Feast of the Goat*.

### ***The Feast of the Goat***

*The Feast of the Goat* belongs to the subgenre of the contemporary Latin American dictator novel, whose members include, originally, Miguel Ángel Asturias's *The President* (1946), and more latterly, Augusto Roa Bastos's *I the Supreme* (1974), Alejo Carpentier's *Reasons of State* (1974), Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *Autumn of the Patriarch* (1975), and Tomas Eloy Martinez's *The Perón Novel* (1985).<sup>6</sup> The origins of Vargas Llosa's novel may be traced to the mid-1970s when he used the Dominican Republic as the location for the filming of his novel *Captain Pantoja and the Special Service*, though it is tempting to suggest that the novel finally came to be written as a literary response to his first-hand experience of his failed presidential bid and the ensuing dictatorship of Fujimori in his own Peru. As Vargas Llosa (in Jaggi 2002: 31) points out, however, "Fujimori was quite

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5. In fact, Vargas Llosa utterly rejects the term "neoliberal" as an attempt by the Left to conflate liberalism with right-wing conservatism (see, for example, Vargas Llosa 2003b: 159-161).
  6. Ignacio Lopez-Calvo (2005: 10-11) recounts that the impetus for these novels came from a project devised by Vargas Llosa and Carlos Fuentes in 1967, entitled "The Fathers of the Nations", in which they challenged a number of the most prominent contemporary Latin American writers to contribute a novel about a dictator from their own countries.

different to Trujillo – a more mediocre tyrant. His big ambition and appetite was money. What Trujillo wanted was power”. Yet he acknowledges there are parallels: “As with Trujillo, Fujimori was very popular. Though dirty things were going on – torture, killings and corruption – his image was of a strongman who would defend people against the terrorists”.

Vargas Llosa’s novel is rather different, however, from the dictator novels of Bastos, Carpentier and Marquez. Whereas they created characters abstracted from precise historical reality, employing allegorical and even magic-realist techniques, Vargas Llosa has chosen to focus in minute, meticulously researched detail upon the very real figure of Rafael Leonidas Trujillo, dictator of the Dominican Republic from 1930 to 1961. Naturally, although the novel is based largely on historical fact, Vargas Llosa has fictionalised much of the detail in order to convey the essence of the dictatorship, to show, as he puts it, “that which history cannot show” (in Lopez-Calvo 2005: 34). The purpose of the novel, therefore, is to reveal the mind of both the dictator and his victims and, as Lionel Abrahams (1987: 152) once put it in a different context, “to go where journalism and historiography do not have to go – into the core of the individual experience, where the politics, the economics, the conflict and disruption are not just thought but undergone and felt”. Yet, despite the specificity of focus, the novel achieves a generality of significance far beyond the particular circumstances of the “Trujillo Era”. As John Sturrock (2002: 1) has observed, “there’s nothing remotely allegorical about the story as it’s told here, in very concrete terms, but it’s not hard either to take this particular Strong Man as standing for the rest of his grisly cousinhood”. Even more than that, however, *The Feast of the Goat*, for all its hyper-realistic concentration on the brutality of life under a dictator, functions as a powerful and profound meditation on the nature and meaning of those classically antagonistic human aspirations: power and freedom. It is an exploration, on the one hand, of the recurrent will to power, and on the other, of the seemingly inexplicable capacity for human beings to surrender their own free will to the dictates of a single megalomaniacal man. As such, the novel resonates not only with recent Latin American dictatorships but with the entire twentieth-century history of charismatic authoritarian leaders, from Hitler, Mussolini and Franco, to Stalin and Mao, to any number of African tyrants,<sup>7</sup> and, indeed, with any socio-political circumstances in which individuals forfeit their liberty, voluntarily or otherwise, for the sake of some other putative good.

Like many of Mario Vargas Llosa’s novels, *The Feast of the Goat* is made up of several narratorial perspectives and temporal frames. The focalising

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7. The portrayal of Idi Amin in the recent film, *The Last King of Scotland* (Macdonald 2006), reveals eerie parallels with Vargas Llosa’s depiction of Trujillo.

point of the novel is the day of the assassination of the dictator Trujillo on Tuesday, 30 May 1961. Trujillo is known derogatorily as “the Goat” for his caprine proclivities, sexual and otherwise, and the title of the novel (and its epigraph) is taken from a merengue,<sup>8</sup> or popular song, “They Killed the Goat”, celebrating the day of his death:

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

The events leading up to this fateful day, however, as well as its terrible aftermath, are conveyed through three different, alternating narrative lines. The first is that of Urania Cabral,<sup>9</sup> daughter of one of Trujillo’s inner circle, who returned in 1996 to the Dominican Republic for the first time after an unexplained thirty-five-year exile in the United States; the second is that of Trujillo himself, as the novel follows him through the elaborate itinerary of his final day; and the third is that of his four principal assassins, turning their thoughts over in their minds as they wait anxiously for the moment of execution. Within each of these narrative lines, however, further perspectives are introduced: Urania’s re-creation of her father’s reasons for betraying her and the reactions of her family towards her present-day disclosures; the revelation of the characters of Trujillo’s subordinates through his thoughts and his interactions with them; and, through the assassins’ introspection, the personalities of other co-conspirators in the attempted coup. Indeed, since the actual assassination takes place less than halfway through the story, the novel is able to delve further into the minds of two other key characters: General José René “Pupo” Román, a leading conspirator who finds himself unable to act decisively after the assassination and who is then destroyed in the reprisals; and Dr Joaquín Balaguer, the insignificant puppet president, who seizes the moment of Trujillo’s death to transform himself into a figure of real political power.

Through the multiple perspectives of this complex narrative architecture, and through the complex temporal shifts, the novel is able to present both a detailed account of conditions obtaining in the Dominican Republic in May 1961, as well as a panoramic sweep of the country’s history from its earliest colonisation to the present day, though centred, naturally, on the period of

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8. Ironically, the philistine Trujillo, who habitually detested the arts, helped to popularise the merengue into mainstream Dominican culture in probably his only positive contribution to his nation’s artistic life.

9. Urania and her family are among the only wholly fictional characters in the novel, though naturally Vargas Llosa has to various degrees imaginatively re-created the characters of the many real-life figures in the text.

Trujillo's rule. The result is a rich portrayal of a particular moment in time, played out simultaneously both on the pages of political history as well as in the intimate lived experience of individual human beings. Given the novel's structural intricacy, as well as the force of its characterisation, it is useful to deal with each of the three narrative lines in turn.

## Urania

Urania Cabral's return to the Dominican Republic's capital, Santo Domingo, seems almost as unconsidered and unplanned as her departure from it had been as a fourteen-year-old schoolgirl thirty-five years previously. A successful New York lawyer, she has returned ostensibly to visit her dying father, but her visit is made out of neither compassion nor duty. The reasons for her initial departure, for her lengthy exile and silence, and now her return, are revealed gradually as the novel progresses, and although at first her story seems only tangentially related to the central narrative thrust, its significance becomes increasingly pointed with time. The chapters dealing with Urania all take place on a single day when she visits her father in their old, now decidedly shabby house, meets up with her cousins, Lucinda and Manolita, and then has dinner with them and her aunt Adelina, her father's sister, that evening. The story which she eventually tells, in the course of the evening, reveals as much as anything in the novel about what it was like to live, as John Powers (2001: 1) trenchantly puts it, "under the Goat".

Her mother had died in an accident when she was very young, and she was raised by her father, whom she adored, but that seems to be precisely why she feels such undiluted hatred and rage towards him now: "Your father had been both father and mother during those years. That's why you loved him so much. That's why it hurt you so much, Urania" (p. 13).<sup>10</sup> Her father is now over eighty years old and virtually incapacitated – "just a piece of a man" (p. 186) – having suffered a cerebral haemorrhage some time previously. Although he is unable to speak, or even understand perhaps, Urania nevertheless interrogates him bitterly about the past, and especially about the Trujillo Era: "The most important thing that happened to us in five hundred years. You used to say that with so much conviction. It's true, Papa. During those thirty-one years, all the evil we had carried with us since the Conquest became crystallized" (p. 55).

Senator Agustín Cabral had been one of Trujillo's closest and most valued advisors, the President of the Senate, and yet, as Urania points out, in reality

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10. All references, unless otherwise specified, are to the 2002 Faber & Faber English translation edition of *The Feast of the Goat*, and will be given by page number(s) only.

like all of Trujillo's subordinates, they had never been anything but "filthy rags" (p. 63) to the dictator. Through all her years of extensive and obsessive research about the Dominican Republic during the Trujillo era,<sup>11</sup> she claims to have come to understand certain things about that time which at first had seemed "impenetrable"; for example,

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

(p. 63)

But what she cannot comprehend, and what she has perhaps returned to find out, is how "cultured, educated, intelligent" men like her father could have allowed themselves to become so pathetically subservient, and to maintain such "slavish loyalty", to Trujillo (p. 63). Through Urania's relentless questioning, then, Vargas Llosa introduces one of the central issues which the novel is going to explore:

how the best-educated Dominicans, the intellectuals of the country, the lawyers, doctors, engineers, often graduates of very good universities in the United States or Europe, sensitive, cultivated men of experience, wide reading, ideas, presumably possessing a highly developed sense of the ridiculous, men of feeling and scruples, could allow themselves to be so savagely abused ....

(p. 63)

Quite what form that abuse took in the case of her father, and how it impacted so traumatically upon Urania, is a question to which this article will later return.

## Trujillo

For the first part of the novel, the character of Urania is almost completely overshadowed by the towering personality of Trujillo. Machiavellian, murderous and utterly mesmerising, Vargas Llosa's Trujillo,<sup>12</sup> far from

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11. For example she cites "Crassweller ... the best-known biographer of Trujillo" (p. 64). Apart from his own personal research, Robert D. Crassweller's *Trujillo: The Life and Times of a Caribbean Dictator* (1966) was also an important source for Vargas Llosa himself. See also Bernard Diederich's *Trujillo: The Death of the Goat* (1978).

being some reified figure of evil, or a quasi-mythological villain, is a true-life character, a totally plausible embodiment of supreme, corrupt power, depicted throughout the novel with remarkable verisimilitude. As Vargas Llosa himself puts it, “I didn’t want to present Trujillo as a grotesque monster or a brutal clown, as is usual in Latin American literature ... I wanted a realist treatment of a human being who became a monster because of the power he accumulated and the lack of resistance and criticism” (in Jaggi 2002: 31). To this end, Trujillo’s character is not so much described or asserted, as it is revealed from the inside, through the febrile, rancorous workings of his inner consciousness and through his interactions with his terrified, cowed underlings. But perhaps the true genius of Vargas Llosa’s creation is that Trujillo’s entire being is unveiled in the course of a single day, his final day as it turns out, as he goes about the business of controlling his country and his world with ruthless efficiency, while struggling to control, with a barely suppressed rage of frustration, the failings of his ageing, sixty-nine-year-old body. Nevertheless, through his personal memories and public recollections, the whole history of his rise to power and the brutal mechanisms by which for three decades he has “controlled the destiny of the Republic and the lives and deaths of all Dominicans” (pp. 35-36) are laid bare.

The core of Trujillo’s personality is disclosed in the first moments of his waking day, which begins at exactly four o’clock in the morning. Having been trained by the US Marines as part of the Dominican National Police (later army), which was intended to maintain law and order after the withdrawal of the United States military in 1924, Trujillo has developed and sustained a mania for discipline, routine, precision and attention to detail. Exemplary in his own appearance and military bearing, he will not tolerate the slightest lapse in anyone else. (When one of his senior officers once presented himself with urgent military news straight from the front line, Trujillo could barely suppress the urge to have him shot right then and there for his battle-soiled appearance.) He even copies the small brush moustache of Hitler, whom he admires “not for his ideas but for the way he wore a uniform and presided over parades” (p. 102).

Trujillo is a character at once terrifying and absurd. Though he seems utterly unaware of it, he seems on the surface the very epitome of “a tinhorn Caribbean dictator” (p. 97) in his insane and inane egomaniacal excesses. He takes as his role model the refined but deadly aesthete, Petronius, from *Quo Vadis?*, the only book evidently he has ever read. He wears a tricorne hat, heavy wool uniform and a veritable panoply of medals and decorations

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12. There have, in fact, been a number of novelistic treatments of Trujillo, but none has achieved the artistry and impact of Vargas Llosa’s book. Ignacio Lopez-Calvo (2005) provides a useful survey of these works, though his own discussion of *The Feast of the Goat* is rather superficial and even inaccurate in places.

even in the blazing heat of a Caribbean summer day. Having renamed the capital Cuidad Trujillo (Trujillo City), he demands that citizens display a plaque in their homes with the words, “In this house Trujillo is the Chief” (p. 9). He insists on being referred to, and addressed, as “the Chief, the Generalissimo, the Benefactor, the Father of the New Nation, Maximum Leader, His Excellency Dr Rafael Leonidas Trujillo Molina” (p. 7). Likewise, his mother is “the Sublime Monarch” (p. 12) and his wife “the Bountiful First Lady” (p. 19). He promoted his eldest son to the rank of Colonel at the age of seven, and then to Lieutenant General at ten (p. 114). He squanders millions of dollars on farcically extravagant celebrations of the twenty-fifth anniversary of his self-titled “Trujillo Era” (p. 115). Indeed, he really does seem to have come to believe that he is an apostle of God on earth, as suggested in Balaguer’s fulsome speech, “God and Trujillo” (p. 265).

Yet, for all this spectacular buffoonery, Trujillo remains a ruthless and callous tyrant. He boasts about and relishes the countless opponents he has had killed over the years, from early political adversaries to military officers he has suspected of sedition (or who had merely clashed with members of his family), to intellectual critics of his regime,<sup>13</sup> as well as many other innocent and harmless persons who have incurred his wrath. On a grander scale, he recalls with faux regret the most difficult of all the steps he has been forced to take “to make this country great” (p. 192): the decision on 2 October 1937 to order the massacre of untold thousands of Haitian illegal immigrants (p. 192ff). Haiti borders the Dominican Republic on the western side of the island, Hispaniola, which they share, but Haitians are regarded as inferior black pagans by the white, Catholic Dominican elite.<sup>14</sup> In this episode, known as the Parsley Massacre, any person who could not pronounce the “r” in the Spanish word for parsley, *perejil*, was summarily executed by army soldiers. For Trujillo, this ghastly affair, which first earned him international opprobrium, is aphoristically justified: “great ills require great remedies” (p. 7).

More recently, however, Trujillo’s murderous ways have become too much for even his oldest and closest allies, and when the novel opens Trujillo is finding himself increasingly isolated and embattled on a number of fronts. Firstly, his regime’s attempted assassination of the Venezuelan

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13. These include the historian José Almoina, who had dared to condemn the “Trujillo satrapy” (p. 73) and who was assassinated in Mexico City, Professor Jesús de Galíndez who was kidnapped in New York and “disappeared” (p. 97), and Ramón Marrero Aristy, the author and editor who had allegedly acted as an informant for the reporter Tad Szulc of *The New York Times* (p. 270).

14. Ironically Trujillo’s maternal ancestors were themselves “Haitian blacks” (p. 29).

president, Rómulo Betancourt, has led to sanctions being imposed by all the members of the Organisation of American States (OAS), which is rapidly crippling his country's economy. Secondly, the murder of the dissident Mirabal sisters<sup>15</sup> on 25 November 1960 has not only galvanised several underground organisations into more direct action, but has provoked a number of other individuals (including some of Trujillo's actual assassins) into seeking his immediate elimination. Thirdly, his continued flagrant abuse of human rights has caused the Catholic Church, once "a solid ally" (p. 264) of his, to condemn the "oppression and tyranny" of his rule (p. 216).<sup>16</sup> Fourthly, and perhaps most importantly, Trujillo's excesses have finally exhausted the patience of the United States, so that he has "stopped being the spoiled darling of Yankee governments and [has become] an embarrassment attacked by the press and many in Congress" (p. 306), and his removal from power is becoming increasingly demanded.<sup>17</sup>

Trujillo's reaction to this adversity is predictable. He believes that he has single-handedly transformed the Dominican Republic from a primitive backwater into "a modern country" (p. 7), establishing law and order, creating economic stability and prosperity, vastly improving the country's infrastructure, and developing the Armed Forces into the most powerful in the Caribbean (p. 94). It is thus with barely controlled fury that he considers the ingratitude of those he feels he has helped and supported over the years. In fact, it is part of the novel's stylistic achievement that so much insight is gained into Trujillo's mind through the splenetic expletive-riddled invective directed against his enemies, as well as the scathing contempt he expresses for his inferior family members and subordinates.

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15. The story of the Mirabal sisters became the subject of a book by Julia Álvarez, entitled *The Time of the Butterflies* (1995), and later a motion picture of the same name (Barroso 2001). *The Feast of the Goat*, incidentally, was turned into a motion picture by Vargas Llosa's brother-in-law, Luis Llosa, in 2006.
  16. The deposed Argentine dictator, Perón, had advised Trujillo to beware of the Church, which he felt had been mainly responsible for his own overthrow some years previously (see p. 219).
  17. During the Cold War years, Trujillo had staunchly aligned himself with the USA, establishing the Dominican Republic as a bulwark against the spread of Communism in the Caribbean in exchange for extensive foreign aid and military support. For years America had tolerated his aberrations: as Cordell Hull famously (and originally) said, "He was a son of a bitch, but he was our son of a bitch". Now, however, especially in the wake of the Bay of Pigs fiasco in April 1961, America seems to have lent its support for Trujillo's removal, by force if necessary (the details in the novel, as in the historical record, are sketchy), and President Kennedy is even prepared to order a military invasion of the country.

A crucial question which the novel raises and explores, then, is how it is possible for someone like Trujillo to exercise his power in such abusive and dehumanising ways without anyone being able to stand up to him at all, or criticise him in even the mildest fashion. Part of the reason lies in the fact that Trujillo has eliminated his strongest opponents and surrounded himself with able yet utterly sycophantic aides who are more than willing to pander to his every whim. As Urania says of the motives of men like Senator Henry Chirinos, and more especially her father, it was not so much “the illusion that you were wielding power” or enjoying “success”, but rather that “Trujillo pulled a vocation for masochism up from the bottom of your souls, that you were people who needed to be spat on and mistreated and debased in order to be fulfilled” (p. 64). A more immediate reason is to be found in the institution of the Military Intelligence Service (SIM) or, more plainly, the secret police, which Trujillo uses to terrify potential opponents into submission. Headed by Colonel Johnny Abbes García, “the malevolent brain” (p. 25), a grotesquely Dickensian figure of merciless, sadistic cruelty (p. 423), under this system, every citizen of any importance is watched, monitored, spied upon and put on record in meticulously kept files. The merest transgression can be met with instant arrest, interrogation, torture and even death: a favourite method of execution being to throw the victim alive into a grotto of man-eating sharks to remove any traces of the crime. More complexly, a further reason lies in the sheer force of Trujillo’s personality, conveyed through a combination of his immaculate appearance, the physical strength which “contributed to his aura of superiority” (p. 18), his unusual yet strangely powerful “high-pitched, cutting voice” (p. 92), and most of all perhaps his legendary gaze. As one of his assassins recalls, it is “a gaze that no one could endure without lowering his eyes, intimidated and annihilated by the force radiating from those piercing eyes that seemed to read one’s most secret thoughts and most hidden desires and appetites, and made people feel naked” (p. 37).

But there is something beyond all this, the novel suggests, which has enabled Trujillo to assume such control of the entire country, and then to maintain that control so unremittingly for over three decades. Trujillo exemplifies what Friedrich Nietzsche conceptualised as “the will to power”, in which an extraordinary individual emerges who is prepared to overcome any odds in order to achieve a God-like power over his inferior fellows, and, eschewing the “slave morality” of the common herd, establishes himself as their absolute master.<sup>18</sup> As Trujillo himself asserts early in the novel, he prides himself on the fact that no other Dominican has “a millionth of his energy, his will, his vision” (p. 24). Later on, he observes that “he had never cared very much about money. He used it in the service of power” (p. 147). And, in the course of his dictatorship he has resolutely pursued the goal of

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18. See, for example, *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (1910).

power: “in every sphere – political, military, institutional, social, economic – he [had amassed] such extraordinary power that all the dictators the Dominican Republic had endured in its entire history as a republic ... were pygmies compared to him” (p. 94). It is, over and above everything else, this voracious desire for absolute power that drives Trujillo, that makes him what he is, and that enables him without hesitation to destroy anyone or anything that might stand in his path.

In this regard, his rule represents the complete antithesis to the principles and values of liberal democracy. Political liberalism emerged historically as an alternative to the absolute power of European monarchism, and emphasised in its purest forms the strictest possible limitation of power over the individual by the State. Individual liberty may be restricted only insofar as it interferes with the equal maximum freedom of other individuals. This principle, which has come to be known as the “harm principle”, was most forcefully expressed by John Stuart Mill in his famous essay, “On Liberty”, in which he argued that

the sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number is self-protection. That the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilised community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant .... The only part of the conduct of anyone for which he is amenable to society is that which concerns others. In the part which merely concerns himself, his independence is, of right, absolute. Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign.

(Mill [1859]1985: 68)

Mill’s principle has of course given rise over the years to endless debates about what constitutes “harm”, especially in complex communities, but it continues to serve as a crucial guide to the meaning and fundamental importance of individual liberty in an open society today (see Flathman 1997; Pettit 2001). As Richard Lindley (1986: 108) points out, contemporary liberal political theory is founded upon the basic premise that human beings are unique, autonomous individuals with different interests, desires and views of life, and that, given this natural human diversity, each human person should be allowed the opportunity to pursue his or her idea of happiness. This is not to propagate an implausible notion of what Marx termed “abstract individualism”: liberalism is after all vitally concerned with matters of social justice (see Kymlicka 1991). Rather, it is to assert what John Gray (1986: 91) terms “a conception of man as a being with the rational and moral capacity” of deciding for himself or herself what constitutes the good life. Barry Holden makes the point succinctly: “Despite the extent to which individuals are social beings, and activity is social rather purely individual, there is also a crucial and irreducible extent to which

individuals are independent of their social environment and their activity is voluntary” (Holden 1993: 167).

In the light of these fundamental principles, liberal social contract theory then distinguishes between legitimate and illegitimate political power. The former is a temporary and conditional authority vested in a government by a democratic electorate as a practical measure to enable individuals to pursue their notion of good living within the framework of society; the latter involves the arbitrary and permanent seizure of power by the few who then by force or coercion impose their will on the rest of society (see Rawls 1993; Boaz 1997). *The Feast of the Goat* demonstrates, from an informed contemporary liberal perspective, just how far removed dictatorship such as Trujillo’s is from the core values of democratic life, and just how destructive unrestrained power in the hands of a single man can be of basic human rights and freedoms.<sup>19</sup>

Bad as Trujillo’s tyranny is, by both international and historical standards, there is still an additionally deleterious feature of the peculiarly Latin American variety of the dictator, or caudillo, and that is the manifestation of the hallowed cultural institution of machismo, an exaggerated masculinity which constantly needs to prove itself, on at least one level, in the area of sexual prowess. In the case of Trujillo, as Laura Miller (2002: 1) has observed in an insightful review, “never has a novel drawn the malignant political potential of crude, unfettered masculinity more ferociously”. Throughout the novel, the explicit link is made between the exercise of power in the caudillo tradition and its symbolic expression in sexual mastery. Early on Trujillo associates ambition and the will to power with masculine sexuality, exemplified in the figure of his former son-in-law, Porfirio Rubirosa, “the Dominican known all over the world for the size of his prick and his prowess as an international cocksman .... That walking cock spurted ambition .... What better propaganda for the Dominican Republic than a cocksman like him?” (pp. 24-25).

Trujillo himself has over the years exercised his *droit de seigneur* with any woman he wants, from innocent country girls to attractive women who catch his eye at state functions, and even to the wives of his ministers, whom he brazenly cuckolds in yet another demonstration of his total command, and as yet another mechanism for keeping his subordinates in a state of humiliated servitude.

It must be noted, however, that to a large degree the people of the Dominican Republic must take responsibility themselves for what has happened. As Vargas Llosa has frequently pointed out (see, for example,

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19. It is unfortunately not possible within the scope and purpose of the present article to explore the subtleties of the Foucault-Habermas debate on the meaning of political power, or, for that matter, the conflicting views of political philosophers such as the liberal John Rawls, the libertarian Robert Nozick, or the Marxist Steven Lukes.

2003b: 164), Latin American society has always tended to overemphasise the traditionally macho traits of strength, determination, will and authority, and to underestimate such values as tolerance, mutual respect and compassion. Indeed, as he goes on to note, the concept of compromise is often disparagingly conflated with cowardice. The Dominican Republic of the Trujillo era is no exception. It is a society wholly dominated by men, where women have status only as sex objects or religious figures, and where such qualities as intelligence and culture have value only insofar as they can serve to perpetuate the might of the military regime. It is revealing that one of the few female authority figures in the country, Minerva Mirabal, is principally admired for her “conviction and boldness” and because she “could dedicate herself to things as manly as planning a revolution” (p. 162). In a society with a value system such as this, it is hardly surprising that someone like Trujillo should not merely be accepted as supreme authority but even be revered for the extreme qualities of machismo which he embodies and asserts. As even Antonio Imbert, one of the more thoughtful of the conspirators, admits, Trujillo’s dictatorship has for many years been not just tolerated by the people but celebrated for establishing the power and strength of the Dominican Republic as a nation:

Who around him had not been a Trujillista for the past twenty, twenty-five years? They all thought the Goat was the savior of the nation, the man who ended the caudillo wars, did away with the threat of a new invasion by Haiti, called a halt to a humiliating dependency on the United States .... Compared to that, what did it matter if Trujillo fucked any woman he wanted? Or swallowed up factories, farms, and livestock? Wasn’t he increasing Dominican prosperity? Hadn’t he given the country the most powerful Armed Forces in the Caribbean?

(p. 165)

And thus, given the choice between power and freedom, between the superficially secure dependence on authority and the risky uncertainty of individual liberty, the people have given in to “the abiding temptation to choose the strongman, the caudillo” (Vargas Llosa in Jaggi 2002: 31). Having made that fatal choice, they realise when it is too late that they have in fact given up their right to choose. And as Trujillo’s power has remorselessly increased over the years, so have the power, the freedom and the will of the people declined to the point where they find themselves at the mercy of “an erratic and vainglorious thug” (Sturrock 2002: 2). They ought well to have heeded the warning of Benjamin Franklin, one of the founding fathers of American democracy, when he asserted that “they that can give up essential liberty to obtain a little temporary safety deserve neither liberty nor safety”.

However, just as Trujillo’s political power is embodied through his physical and sexual control, so, by the time the novel begins, his faltering

political supremacy is signalled by the physical waning of his body. For some time, though he has refused to admit it, he has been suffering from prostate cancer which, along with his advancing years, has had two effects on him, both severely demeaning: incontinence and impotence. The first effect is particularly galling for a man who has for so long prided himself on his impeccable appearance: “cleanliness, caring for his body and his clothing, had been, for him, the only religion he practiced faithfully” (p. 22). Now, on the morning when he wakes to begin his day, he finds to his chagrin that he has once again befouled his sheets:

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

(p. 18)

Later that morning, in his office, when it happens again, “a lashing rage shook him. He could dominate men, bring three million Dominicans to their knees, but he could not control his bladder” (p. 146). If his incontinence is humiliating, then his erectile dysfunction is virtually soul-destroying, for it threatens to shatter the very essence of his machismo and political omnipotence. Significantly, the only time Trujillo appeals to the Almighty is when he is preparing for a sexual assignation with another teenage girl and he fears that he will not be able to perform: “Dear God, do this for me .... I don't care about the priests, the gringos, the conspirators, the exiles. I can clear away all that shit myself. But I need your help to fuck that girl” (p. 339). He never gets the chance, however, for it is on the way to his tryst at Mahogany House, his ranch and country pleasure dome in San Cristobal, that he is gunned down by his assassins. Ironically, the assassins are able to formulate their plan and successfully carry out the execution precisely because of Trujillo's rigidly predictable routine and habitual appetites. The Goat is able to be destroyed, fittingly in a sense, because of those essentialised character traits which he considered so central to his identity: his obsession with order and precision and his lust for sexualised power.

### **The Assassins**

Though there were many people involved in the conspiracy to kill Trujillo, the novel focuses, for purposes of concision and dramatic intensity, on the four principal assassins of the dictator: Lieutenant Amado García Guerrero (Amadito), Antonio de la Maza, Antonio Imbert and Salvador Estrella Sadhalá (Turk). Each has his own personal reasons for wishing to take revenge on Trujillo, but most of them also have more general, moral reasons

for seeking an end to Trujillo's tyranny, and, in addition, they cherish a vision of the kind of country that a liberated Dominican Republic could become. Thus, as the novel traces each man's story in turn – revealed in their thoughts and memories while waiting fretfully in their car on the highway for Trujillo's vehicle to appear – so a more composite picture emerges, not merely of conditions in the Republic under Trujillo's rule but also of an enlightened political alternative to authoritarian dictatorships in general. As these sections of the novel make clear, a crucial determinant in such a liberated political dispensation involves what is in essence the ideological converse of the will to power of the dictator, and that is the free will of the people. By this is meant not only individual rights and liberties, but also the capacity through democratic institutions for the citizenry to elect their leaders and then to hold them accountable by such mechanisms as a multiparty parliament, an independent judiciary and an unshackled press. It is this "sacred attribute" (p. 169) of a liberal democratic society that the assassins and their fellow conspirators are so desperate and determined to regain.

Antonio de la Maza, for example, certainly has his private reasons for wanting to kill "the devil who in thirty-one years had violated and poisoned [the country] more than anything else it had suffered in its history .... More than anything else, what he could not forgive was that just as he had corrupted and brutalized this country, the Goat had also corrupted and brutalized Antonio de la Maza" (p. 89). However, with a rather more mature perspective than that of the youthful Amadito, de la Maza is able to see how his fate is linked to that of the nation as a whole as he considers the underlying reasons for Trujillo's extraordinary hold over his countrymen: "It was something more subtle and indefinable than fear: it was the paralysis, the numbing of determination, reason and free will, which this man, groomed and adorned to the point of absurdity, with his thin high-pitched voice and hypnotist's eyes, imposed on Dominicans, poor or rich, educated or ignorant, friends or enemies" (p. 104). And it is for these very reasons that de la Maza feels justified in putting "an end to the witches' Sabbath that the history of the country had become" (p. 104). Concomitantly, he is able to imagine, however tentatively, a future for the Dominican Republic "once the Goat was eliminated" (p. 108), and once the people had regained their "free will" (p. 104). As he reminds himself, "in spite of everything this was a beautiful country [and] it would be even more beautiful" in a new liberal democratic dispensation when the Dominican Republic would "finally be a normal country, with an elected government, a free press, a system of justice worthy of the name" (p. 108).

A similar line of reasoning informs the thought of de la Maza's fellow assassin, Antonio Imbert, who feels sickened by the fact that the people have not only been made to witness "the enthronement, through violence and propaganda, of a monstrous lie" (p. 166), but have been forced to

become fully complicit with the regime in its abuses and corruption, whether through subtle manipulation, bribed co-optation or downright terror: “[H]e thought of what a perverse system Trujillo created, one in which all Dominicans sooner or later took part as accomplices, a system which only exiles (not always) or the dead could escape. In this country, in one way or another, everybody had been, was, or would be part of the regime” (p. 169). Like de la Maza, however, he is able to envision a future beyond Trujillo’s rule, a future in which the people regain their freedom, and are able to enjoy their civil and common liberties in an atmosphere of openness and opportunity:

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

(pp. 169-170)

Unlike the others, Salvador Estrella Sadhalá, known to all as Turk, is a devout Catholic, whose intention to kill Trujillo derives from no specific instance of personal abuse but rather from a lifelong sense of revulsion at Trujillo’s various excesses and their consequences. He has long felt that Trujillo is to be held personally responsible for the descent into degradation of the Dominican people, including himself at times, because they had been denied the basic rights of democratic life: “It was the fault of the Beast that so many Dominicans turned to whores, drinking binges, and other dissipations in order to ease their anguish at leading a life without a shred of liberty or dignity, in a country where human life was worth almost nothing. Trujillo had been one of Satan’s most effective allies” (p. 222).

For many years, however, the church had been supportive of Trujillo’s regime (see pp. 214-215), and had turned a blind eye to its wrongdoings even as it benefited materially from the government’s many corrupt practices. However, Trujillo’s continued and egregious abuses of human rights finally become too much for the Church Fathers. As a result, the Dominican Church at last stands up to Trujillo and condemns his regime in a Pastoral Letter read out in every church across the country on Sunday, 24 January 1960. This crucial document addresses for the first time “the deep suffering that afflicts so many Dominican homes” and “the millions of human beings who continue to live under oppression and tyranny”, for whom “nothing is secure: not their homes, their property, their liberty, nor their honor” (p. 216). The Letter recalls that “the root and foundation of all rights lie in the inviolate dignity of the human person” and reaffirms that “all men have the right to freedom of conscience, freedom of the press, and free association” (p. 216). Finally, in the pursuit of “harmony and peace”,

the Letter confrontationally calls for the establishment in the nation of “the sacred rights of human brotherhood” (p. 216).<sup>20</sup> The strategy of the Church is to mobilise the support of the Catholic majority against Trujillo with the eventual aim of his complete removal from power. It has the more immediate effect of spurring Turk into action, for in the weeks following the publication of the Letter, he “considered, for the first time, the need to kill Trujillo” (p. 217). As a devout Catholic, however, he feels constrained by the Fifth Commandment. The answer, for him at least, comes from the papal nuncio, Monsignor Lino Zanini, who points out to Turk a passage from the *Summa Theologica* of St Thomas Aquinas: “God looks with favour upon the physical elimination of the Beast if a people is freed thereby” (p. 219). This is sufficient for Turk to feel justified in his mission of “tyrannicide” (p. 33).

It is less clear where Mario Vargas Llosa himself stands on this question, or whether the novel as a whole finally endorses the actions of the assassins. One of the key dilemmas facing liberalism, not only in Latin America but throughout the modern world, has been whether the use of violence to bring about political change can ever be vindicated. What the novel does affirm, however, is that there seems to be no alternative to assassination. This is made evident, for example, when the idea of staging a coup and removing Trujillo from office is first put to General “Pupo” Román, the head of the Armed Forces: “‘Abduct him? Ask him to resign?’ Pupo was appalled. ‘You’ve got the wrong country and the wrong man, compadre. Don’t you know him? He’ll never let you take him alive. And you’ll never get him to resign. You have to kill him’” (p. 365; see p. 82).

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

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20. This newly liberal spirit abroad in the Catholic Church, not only in the Dominican Republic, but throughout the Catholic world, soon led to the establishment of the Second Vatican Council in 1962-1965, which modernised the church, and transformed it into an institution more ready and willing than before to confront the altered circumstances of the contemporary world, including the question of corrupt political regimes.

## The Aftermath

Although the assassins succeed in killing Trujillo, gunning him down in his car on the highway to San Cristobal, the actual coup itself, initially at least, fails. The plan had been, after Trujillo's death, to install a temporary civilian-military junta under the leadership of General José René "Pupo" Román, and then to work towards the establishment of a fully representative democracy. At the crucial moment, however, Román falters and the opportunity is lost. The reprisals are swift, comprehensive and indescribably gruesome. They are led by Trujillo's dissolute and psychotic eldest son, Ramfis, who returns from his playboy lifestyle in Europe to exact his revenge on the conspirators. Though he lacks his father's political ambition, he has inherited from him his capacity for merciless cruelty, which he now puts into terrifying practice as the confused and disorganised assassins are identified and hunted down. Of the principal assassins, Amadito is traced to his aunt's house and dies in a gunfight with the SIM. Antonio de la Maza, together with another conspirator, General Juan Tomás Díaz, is discovered in the capital and dies in a hail of bullets in Independencia Park. Turk eventually gives himself up and is taken to the infamous El Neuve prison where, along with numerous other conspirators, as well as their families and many other innocent people suspected of being involved in the plot, he is subjected to months of horrific torture. Finally, Turk, the other secondary assassins (Pedro Livio Cedeño, Tunti Cáceres, Huáscar Tejeda and Fifi Pastoriza), as well as another chief conspirator, Modesto Díaz, are taken from the prison and shot in cold blood by Ramfis, who then arranges for their bodies to be "disappeared". Only Antonio Imbert and another conspirator, Luis Amiama Tío, survive, somehow managing to escape detection for almost six months.

The worst treatment of all, however, is reserved for "Pupo" Román. He had demanded to see Trujillo's dead body before acting, but when it is brought to his house, he is not there. Disorientated and even "sombulistic" (p. 375), holding in his hands his own fate, as well as that of his family, his fellow conspirators and the country as a whole, he knows "with absolute lucidity what he should do" and yet he does "exactly the opposite" (p. 369), with the result that he is soon arrested and subjected to the most barbaric torture before finally, mercifully, being shot. He finds his own suicidal inaction virtually inexplicable.

In the sudden attacks of lucidity that reminded him he was alive, that it hadn't ended, he tortured himself with the same question: why, knowing that *this* was waiting for you, why didn't you act as you should have? The question hurt him more than the tortures he faced with great courage, perhaps to prove to himself that cowardice was not the reason he had acted so indecisively on that endless night of May 31, 1961.

(p. 375)

The only answer he can come up with is that the hold which Trujillo has always had over him has persisted even after his death: “Sunk in a state of hypnosis, he thought his inaction could be due to the fact that although the body of the Chief might be dead, his soul, his spirit, whatever you called it, still enslaved him” (p. 376).

On a surface level, several characters recall in retrospect the feeling that they had been under some kind of “spell”. Urania, for example, wonders on behalf of her father how he tried in later years to rationalise his dog-like loyalty to Trujillo once “the spell was broken” (p. 10). More generally, as the remaining members of the Trujillo clan find their attempts to hold onto some form of power foundering, there is a gradual sense of the Chief’s thrall lifting: “Though everyone worried about a coup by the Trujillo brothers that would restore the cruel, harsh dictatorship, people were losing their fear, or, rather, breaking the spell that had kept so many Dominicans devoted, body and soul, to Trujillo” (p. 449).

Similarly, as opposition voices begin to make themselves heard throughout the country, there is the realisation that “the mystical consubstantiation with the Chief, in which Dominicans had lived for thirty-one years, was disappearing” (p. 427). As Michael Wood (2002: 8) persuasively argues, the word in Vargas Llosa’s original Spanish text is “el encantamiento”, which could be translated not only as “spell” but as “enchantment” or “bewitchment”. It is a word, moreover, which has its antecedents in Cervantes’s *Don Quixote* (see p. 238) where the eponymous protagonist comes to perceive the strangest things as “banal reality”. In the case of the Dominican Republic, as with many other dictatorships, people have also come over time to accept the strangest things, especially the most outrageous abuses of power, as ordinary, even normal, and so have eventually reconciled themselves with what has mordantly been termed in similar contexts of tyranny and oppression, “the banality of evil”.

The spell is ultimately broken, however, partly, of course, by the courageous actions of the conspirators and the assassins who have been driven to extreme measures in order to regain their liberty, but also through the political skill of a most unlikely figure, the insignificant Puppet President, Dr Joaquín Balaguer, a man so innocuous that Trujillo once dubbed him the “Shadow” (p. 261). Of all those in Trujillo’s inner circle, Balaguer is the one who remains “something of a mystery” (p. 261) to Trujillo: it appears as if he “lacked ambitions” (p. 261), and he does not “have a man’s natural appetites”, at least in the macho sense of drinking, smoking, eating, or chasing “women, power, or money” (pp. 262-263). Yet, when Trujillo’s death unexpectedly presents him with the opportunity to gain power, it becomes clear that

this unarmed little man, who wrote poetry and seemed so inconsequential in a world of machos with pistols and submachine guns, knew exactly what he wanted and what he was doing, and did not lose his composure for an instant

.... In the vacuum and chaos created by what had happened to the Chief, this insignificant man whom everyone had considered a mere clerk, a purely decorative figure in the regime, began to acquire surprising authority. (p. 379)

Within a few short months, through a combination of sinuous pragmatism and canny intelligence, he succeeds in transforming himself “from a puppet president, a nonentity, into an authentic Head of State, an office recognised by all factions, and, in particular, by the United States”, who are persuaded by “his promise to move the country toward full democracy while maintaining order and not allowing any advantage to the communists” (p. 425). As soon as he has convinced the last of what John Sturrock (2002: 1) aptly terms the “kleptocratic Trujillo clan” to go into voluntary exile, Balaguer declares a political amnesty, releases the remaining prisoners, and appoints a commission to investigate what had happened to the “executioners of the tyrant” (p. 450). And then, in a public relations move of cynical political opportunism, he invites Imbert and Amiama (having emerged from their hiding places) to the National Palace, promotes them to three-star generals “for extraordinary services to the Nation”, and publicly embraces them, “wearing an expression of deep joy, as the photographers’ cameras flashed” (p. 451).

There Mario Vargas Llosa chooses to end the story of the “Trujillo Era”, with the Goat dead, the spell broken, and over a remarkably brief period, “the systematic disappearance of the trappings and symbols of Trujillism” (p. 429). But there is an ironic historical coda to the story, of which Vargas Llosa is only too aware, though he chooses to do no more than allude to it in this novel. Following a period of political instability, during which Balaguer was forced into exile, and which culminated in a year-long United States military occupation of the country, Balaguer was finally elected President in 1966. He retained power until 1978, serving as President for three consecutive terms, during which, as Urania’s cousin Lucinda recalls, the same old oligarchic elite of the Trujillo era “went on living the good life” (p. 185) as if nothing had changed. Worse than that, as the Latin American political historian, Thomas J. D’Agostino (1997: 73-74) observes, Balaguer’s government during this period known as “The Twelve Years” was “practically a successor to the Trujillo regime, with power maintained by military and police intimidation and violence against opponents and journalists. Hundreds were kidnapped or disappeared as political control was established .... Despite his small stature, pronounced eyeglasses and professorial appearance, Balaguer achieved the personality cult of the typical Dominican caudillo, or strongman”. As Ignacio Lopez-Calvo (2005: 128) recalls, Balaguer’s regime was often succinctly characterised as “Trujillism without Trujillo”. Balaguer was persuaded to step down in 1978 by the United States, but got himself re-elected President in 1986 amid

charges of electoral fraud, staying in power until 1996 when he was finally pressured into leaving office by President Bill Clinton.

It is no accident, then, that Vargas Llosa has Urania return to the Dominican Republic in 1996, the year in which “our perpetual president” (p. 190), as she puts it, eventually relinquishes power, and the moment when the “Trujillism” may be said to have come to an end at last. She is addressing her father, but in using the example of Balaguer, she consolidates the point that for all of Balaguer’s apparent lack of ambition or machismo, he came to be as driven by the will to power as Trujillo ever was: “‘Did power satisfy you so much you didn’t need sex? It happens, even in this hot country. It happened to our perpetual president, Don Joaquín Balaguer, didn’t it? A bachelor at the age of ninety .... I always had the impression that sex never interested him, that power gave him what other men got in bed’” (p. 190). Balaguer, then, though different in personality from Trujillo, turns out to be simply another version of the caudillo. Where Trujillo uses macho sexuality as an expression and assertion of his power, Balaguer takes the alternative route of replacing sexuality with the exercise of pure political power. In both cases, however, the result is the same: absolute power located in the hands of a single man and the abrogation of the liberty and dignity of an entire people.

## Urania Again

Although the novel charts the ending of Trujillo’s political era, for many individuals it is an era which will never really end, as they carry their injuries, physical and psychological, with them for the rest of their lives. This is certainly the case with Urania Cabral, whose personal story is given as much weight in the novel as the large-scale political sweep of Trujillo’s regime as a whole. On one level, fairly obviously, her violation at the hands of Trujillo, and her intense, lasting sense of trauma, function as an allegory for the damage and destruction which Trujillo’s tyranny has wrought on the country as a whole. On another level, her individual experience lends an enduring human tangibility to the general sense of the horrifying evil of the times, and provides a particular, representative instance of the consequences of Trujillo’s ingrained, and at times, even casual cruelty.

As it turns out, Senator Agustín Cabral has been ostracised by the Chief and turned into a political pariah for no reason at all, but simply as an example of Trujillo’s bizarre “loyalty tests” (p. 259). As Urania’s young niece, Marianita, remarks, it all sounds like things that happened on another planet, or “like something in *The Trial*”, Kafka’s famous novel where a man “is tried and executed, and he never finds out why” (p. 233).<sup>21</sup> His fall into

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21. She in fact refers, plausibly, to Orson Welles’s film version of the book.

disgrace devastates Cabral, because, having devoted his whole adult life to the service of the Chief, his current fate is tantamount to having his entire existence obliterated overnight (p. 185). He tries everything in his power to restore himself to the Chief's favour, until he is finally, appallingly, persuaded by the ambassador, Manuel Alfonso, who happens to pride himself on being "the Chief's procurer" (p. 316), that the way "to prove his affection and loyalty" and thus to win back Trujillo's approval, is "to offer" him his pretty, fourteen-year-old, virgin daughter (p. 314). Though Cabral is sickened by this quite unexpected proposal, and weakly protests that "she's still a little girl" (p. 314), he finds himself, like so many other Dominicans in the face of the Chief's power, overcome by "an immeasurable lack of will" (p. 317), and eventually agrees "to make a sacrifice" of his daughter (p. 319). So Urania becomes caught up in things about which she had been "totally innocent" hitherto, "things that had to do with desire, instincts, power and the infinite excesses and brutalities that a combination of those things could mean in a country shaped by Trujillo" (p. 321).

On the appointed day, she is taken to what she thinks is "a party" (p. 319) at Trujillo's Mahogany House in San Cristobal. Of course, this is the other meaning of the book's title, for the word "fiesta" signifies not only a festival, or feast-day, as in the song which celebrates Trujillo's death in the novel's epigraph, but also a social gathering or function (see Williams 2001: 269-270). In this episode, the various meanings of "fiesta" blur into one another, for the party which the Goat has planned for Urania is indeed a kind of terrible feast in which he intends sexually to devour the young girl, who is delivered to him like one of "the brides of Moloch" (p. 454), given to him as "a living offering" (p. 458) by her father. For Trujillo, the encounter is entirely self-serving and callous:

He had agreed to the young daughter of Senator Agustín Cabral coming to Mahogany House only to prove that Rafael Leonidas Trujillo Molina, despite his seventy years, despite his prostate problems, despite his headaches with priests, Yankees, Venezuelans, conspirators, was still a real man, a stud with a prick that could still get hard and break all the virgin cherries that came his way.

(pp. 464-465)

Trujillo's intended proof to himself of his enduring virility fails miserably as, in spite of all his efforts, he cannot maintain an erection. In a blinding fury, he uses his fingers to break the young girl's hymen and then lapses into a weeping, cursing, ranting fit, before finally dismissing the terrified little girl.

Although her life, surprisingly perhaps, is spared, in an emotional sense she is condemned to another sort of death. She manages to avoid her father and flees to her school, the Santo Domingo Academy, where courageous, sympathetic nuns arrange for her to escape to a sister school in Adrian,

Michigan, in the United States. After school she graduates from Harvard, and becomes a lawyer in the World Bank, later taking up a position with a prestigious New York law firm. However, if her life seems outwardly successful, inwardly it has been an emotional wasteland: she eventually confesses to her family that “no man has ever laid a hand on me since that time .... Whenever one gets close and looks at me as a woman, I feel sick. Horrified. I want him to die. I want to kill him” (p. 470). Feeling “empty and full of fear” (p. 470), she has “been trembling for thirty-five years, ever since that moment” (p. 468), a moment when “Papa and His Excellency turned me into a desert” (p. 470; see also pp. 188-189).

As in so much of Mario Vargas Llosa’s fiction, the ending to the novel (for the novel ends with Urania’s story) seems overwhelmingly bleak. And yet, the novel does offer some hope, however slight it might appear in relation to the larger historical forces depicted in the text. In a novel dominated, like the Dominican Republic itself, by the power lust of a violent and aggressive machismo, it is not insignificant that the final moments of the novel focus upon a woman, Urania, and her discovery and rediscovery of her bonds with other women. She recalls, for example, that after her ordeal with Trujillo, it was the sisters at her school, and her favourite teacher, Sister Mary, in particular, who treated her with compassion and understanding, expediting her transfer to the school in Michigan, preventing her father from seeing her, and, no doubt, saving her from “the belated rage of Trujillo” (p. 471; see p. 145) in the process. As terrible as her experience was, she appreciates that “it let me learn about the generosity, the delicacy, the humanity of Sister Mary .... Without her I’d be crazy or dead” (p. 471). Furthermore, her odyssey has enabled her to become reunited with the female members of her family – aunt, cousins, niece – who have allowed her to unburden herself and who have responded to her story with shared sorrow and genuine empathy. Brushing off Urania’s apology for making the evening so “bitter”, her cousin Lucinda retorts: ““What are you talking about, girl? Now I understand what happened, the reason for the silence that made us all so sad. Please, Urania, come back and see us. We’re your family, this is your country”” (p. 474). Perhaps most encouraging of all is her niece, Marianita, who is too young to have been exposed to, and affected by, the particular vileness of Trujillo’s rule. It is she who most embraces Urania as a beloved, injured aunt, and who offers real hope of a meaningful relationship in the future: ““I’m going to love you very much, Aunt Urania’, she whispers in her ear, and Urania feels paralyzed by sadness. ‘I’m going to write every month. It doesn’t matter if you answer or not”” (p. 474). And Urania seems to surprise herself when, in the final sentence of the novel, she decides: ““If Marianita writes to me, I’ll answer all her letters”” (p. 475).

It is, then, a novel which, after all the numbing brutality and macho violence of its central focus, ends on a quiet and even tender note, with the

hope that Urania will at last find the peace and love which has eluded her for so long. The point is made eloquently by the reviewer, Jonathan Heawood, in his summation of the book:

The complex orbital structure, the relentless savagery, the psychotic grotesquerie – *The Feast of the Goat* is as dark and complicated as a Jacobean revenge tragedy; but it is also rich and humane. Urania finally confronts her family with what happened in Trujillo's bedroom 35 years earlier, and their instinctive distress brings back some sense or normality, of how things might have been, how they might still be. After all the narrative loops, and the sense of history endlessly repeating, the novel settles in its final pages into a steady gaze at a future uncontaminated by the past.

(Heawood 2002: 11)

## Conclusion

Although it is set explicitly in the Dominican Republic during Trujillo's dictatorship, *The Feast of the Goat* remains a highly topical and pertinent novel. Certainly in Latin America the era of the Strong Man or caudillo is by no means over, as the examples of Hugo Chavez in Venezuela and Rafael Correa in Ecuador make clear. As Mario Vargas Llosa (in Lopez-Calvo 2005: 7) himself has observed, in many parts of the world, including the emerging democracies of Latin America, the institutions and traditions of liberal government have yet to take firm hold in the minds of the populace: "Democracy, tolerance, civic spirit are still an anomaly in history, a privilege. Living in the Western world one ends up having an erroneous perspective and forgets that the majority is barbarism, authoritarianism, despotism". Yet even Vargas Llosa was astounded that during the most recent elections in his native Peru in 2006, a significant percentage of the electorate opted for Ollante Humala, a virtual carbon copy of the previous dictator, Alberto Fujimori: "[H]ow is it possible that at least a third of Peruvians want a return to dictatorship, authoritarianism, a subjugated press, judicial manipulation, impunity and the systematic abuse of human rights?" (in Carroll 2007: 20). Beyond the specifics of history and geography, however, *The Feast of the Goat* has relevance to any situation where the opposing forces of power and freedom come into conflict with each other. As such, it is appropriate to conclude by considering two telling axioms of the great nineteenth-century liberal historian, Lord Acton, whose essays on power and freedom continue to serve as a warning against the abuses of authority and a reminder of the crucial value of liberty. The first, which comes from his correspondence with Bishop Creighton (Acton [1887]1956: 364) is one which almost everyone knows: "All power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely". Not everyone knows a sentence which precedes it, however: "[R]emember, where you have a concentration of

power in a few hands, all too frequently men with the mentality of gangsters get control; history has proven that". Both sentences could have been written specifically for Rafael Leonidas Trujillo himself. But if *The Feast of the Goat* dramatises the reality of the corrupting effects of absolute power, it also explores how little value people all too frequently place on their own freedom. The novel demonstrates, chillingly, not only how easily people tend to forfeit their basic freedoms in exchange for some other supposed social or economic good, but more importantly how difficult it is to regain those freedoms in the face of the tyranny and oppression which almost invariably follows. In every sense, *The Feast of the Goat* bears out the truth of Lord Acton's words from his famous lecture on the history of freedom (1877; 1956: 74): "Liberty is not a means to a higher political end. It is itself the highest political end".

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