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10. From *Azoteas* to Dungeons: Spain as Archaeology of the Despotism in Alexander Dallas's Novel *Vargas* (1822)

Fernando Durán López

Abstract

Alexander Dallas, ex-combatant in the Peninsular War, wrote books on Spanish-related themes with great affection for Spanish life and culture. However, there was one limit to this admiration: the rivalry between the Protestants and Catholics. Dallas's move into the Anglican clergy goes some way to explaining why in his last novel, *Vargas, a Tale of Spain*, published anonymously in 1822, his Hispanophilia gave way to immersion in the attitudes, opinions and central themes related to the so-called Black Legend. The evocation of customs and landscapes is thus wrapped in an argument from the sixteenth century, the Inquisition and religious superstitions assuming a protagonist role and flipping the way he approaches Spanish reality. This complex dialogue between Hispanophilia and Hispanophobia reveals their strong common foundation: condescension.

Keywords: English historical novel, Alexander Dallas, Spanish Inquisition, Peninsular War, Religious rivalries

Alternately assuming the characters of a Spaniard and of an Englishman, he had an opportunity of following the current of that most interesting portion of the Modern History of Spain, with advantages that were possessed by few.

– [Alexander Dallas], *Vargas*, 'Preface', I, viii¹

¹ All quotations of *Vargas* are drawn from the anonymous original edition of 1822, indicating volume and page number. There was also a Dutch translation in 1840 and two Spanish translations (attributed to Joseph Blanco White) in 1995 and 1997.

The novel *Vargas* occupies a problematic space in the literary studies of the period, because it is written in English but was attributed consistently, though without substantial proof, to the Anglicised Spanish exile Joseph Blanco White. The erroneous attribution was maintained for the most part by those specializing in the work of the Sevillian writer, with the notable exception of Vicente Llorens, and this mistake led to two translations under Blanco White's name and numerous studies that inserted the novel's vision of Spain into the parameters of the work and thought of Blanco, the liberal Spanish exile, and into the dialectic belonging to a Catholic who had converted to Protestantism. For this reason, the text was situated in a no man's land between English literature in the narrow sense and literature not strictly 'Spanish', but rather the literature 'by Spaniards' exiled in England, which meant it was in an area of criticism that researchers of neither English nor Spanish literature considered their own. This novel could not represent the English vision of Spain, because the author was Spanish; neither could it represent an authentically Spanish view, because it was written in English for an English public by a Spaniard who had voluntarily left his homeland in order to embrace a critical conception of his former country that was extremely harsh in the religious, political and cultural sense.

This position is important to note, as several years ago I was able to demonstrate conclusively that *Vargas* was not written by Blanco White, but rather by the Englishman Alexander Dallas, the latter offering a suggestive ensemble of divergences, symmetries, and convergences with the former. The authorship of Dallas has been proven by three factors: a direct declaration by the author, in which he clearly claims authorship in a late autobiography²; abundant material evidence, including the manuscript of *Vargas* in a collection of papers from Dallas in the Biblioteca Nacional de España; and various sorts of textual evidence found within the novel itself.³ The objective of the present study is to reinterpret the content of *Vargas* in light of its true authorship and its indisputable placement within English literature, particularly with respect to its representation of Spain. To this end, it would be worth doing a reinterpretation of the criticism of *Vargas* that had begun with its false attribution to Joseph Blanco White, although here I will prioritize the internal analysis. A later step in the analysis would include reintegrating *Vargas* into the rich and complex development of the topic of Spain in British Romanticism, demonstrating its similarities with

2 [Dallas], *Incidents*, p. 167.

3 Durán López, 'Limpiando un borrón' and 'Algo más sobre la infundada atribución'.

and differences from other contemporary readings in English letters,⁴ an analysis better left to specialists in that literary field.

A dissected map of Spain

The English writer Alexander Dallas was one of the first British soldiers in the Peninsular War to write about Spanish matters. He did so with great admiration and extensive knowledge of the life, language and culture of Spain, in a poem about guerrillas (*Ramirez*, 1817), a semi-autobiographical novel about war (*Felix Alvarez; or, Manners in Spain*, 1818) and a historical novel set in the sixteenth century (*Vargas, a Tale from Spain*, 1822). These books explain to his compatriots the reasons behind this admiration for and curiosity about a country that they neither knew nor understood, sometimes battling against their prejudices and sometimes interpreting them. His very conception of the fictional genre – based on variety rather than unity – highlights this intention: for him, the argument is a thread from which to hang elements whose purpose is always to present the history and character of Spain. The first page of *Vargas* demonstrates this by showing Dallas's doubts when starting a book:

I had chosen my subject, and sketched out my plan – nay more, I had actually written several detached portions, which are to be dovetailed into certain parts of the work, and which lie upon my table, like stray counties belonging to a dissected map.⁵

A map of Spain scattered in fragments on a table, or on printed pages: a good description of Dallas's literary works. His most Hispanophilic work is *Ramirez*, focused on the courage and primitive ferocity of the guerrillas who fought against brutal French invaders. However, this sympathy has limitations, and in two areas Dallas maintains the traditional European Hispanophobia, known by its inaccurate name, the Black Legend⁶: the rivalry between Protestants and Catholics, and British patriotism.

In *Felix Alvarez*, we find an abundance of attacks against 'papist superstitions', the Catholic clergy and the Catholicism that permeates Spanish

4 See the essay by Diego Saglia in this volume.

5 *Vargas*, I, p. 2.

6 That brief formula saves explanations, but it is a problematic concept subject to revision and even to denial. See Villanueva, *Leyenda Negra*; Durán López, 'Felipe II'.

society, but it is a minor element, mentioned sporadically with condescension or reproach. This contempt for the religion does not prevent him from reflecting on, with fascination, the landscapes, folklore, culture and surprising customs of the Spaniards, barely European for eyes avid for exoticism and authenticity. And on the other hand, the British view of the Peninsular War is widely accepted: that the Spaniards were undisciplined and ill-directed soldiers who were saved by an effective British army. However, the peoples' suffering during the war, the cruelty of the French army and the indomitable ferocity of the guerrillas tip the balance on the side of Hispanophilia, and turn that novel into one of the more favourable accounts of Spaniards amongst English texts about the war.

This leaning shifts though when Dallas turns to faith and the clergy, converting him into an activist and fanatical Anglican clergyman. In *Vargas* he is fully immersed in the attitudes, opinions and central themes of the Black Legend, giving prominence to the cruelty of Philip II, the torments of the Spanish Inquisition and the persecutions of the Protestant 'martyrs'. *Vargas* amplifies the argument of *Cornelia Bororquia*, the famous anti-clerical novel by the *afrancesado* author Luis Gutiérrez. This study will analyse the dialogue in Dallas's works – and by extension in British society – between the recent Hispanophilia motivated by both the war and Romanticism, and the old Hispanophobia inherited and rooted in discriminatory national and religious identities.

Exoticism and history

Cornelius Villiers, Dallas's alter ego who acts as the narrator in *Vargas*, boasts of a love for Spain, cultivated during his several years of residence there before the Peninsular War. In the prologue, Villiers longs for the landscapes of the Pyrenees, Guadarrama and Sierra Morena, but he also made note of 'the pleasant flat roofs of Seville or Cadiz' (I, 5), and went on to then praise ancient Spanish literature, unknown, he says, by the English. Mena, Feijoo, Argensola, Lope, Calderón, and of course Cervantes are just some of the literary glories mentioned in the book. In the first few pages he also praises the Spanish habit of eating late and having a *siesta*. So we have, from the outset, the ingredients that go into the recipe of what Spain is: landscapes, culture and popular customs. Walter Scott had established at the time a historical novel genre designed to show the Scots and the English their own past in an attractive way. In the same way Cornelius Villiers says:

I feel almost inclined to turn historian myself; to cull the flowers with which the extensive garden of Spanish history abounds, that I may present them as a rare bouquet of exotics to my countrymen.⁷

Dallas defines his objective on two levels: rarity and exoticism. And here lies his main difference with Scott, who serves his readers fragments of their own world, recovered from oblivion, but, after all, familiar and understandable. Dallas is processing an alien world, and therefore has to explain it and align it with the nineteenth-century values of the British Protestants. And the way it becomes interesting lies in the strange and exotic, which has ties to the new notion of Romanticism and with the Hispanophilia of *Ramirez* and *Felix Alvarez*. But the novel's opening lines also reveal its central themes: the 'baneful Upas tree' of the Inquisition and 'the iron hand of despotism' (I, 5). At the moment of truth, in Dallas's view, the idea of Spain is substantiated as a struggle between his love for the *azoteas* bathed in the sun and his disgust for intolerant Catholicism; this struggle upsets the balance.

Vargas combines, in the style of Scott, actual historical events with a fictitious storyline that is, at the same time, representative of general historical developments. What is historical and what is fictitious must maintain a close relationship for the formula to work. The first and key decision of the novelist, who reveals his inversion of priorities on the Spanish theme, is to choose that combination of history and storyline. The narrator affirms that the English have ignored many a treasure in Spanish history such as the medieval chronicles of López de Ayala, Álvaro de Luna or Pero Niño:

Charles V is indeed known, but he is principally talked of in his imperial character. Everybody has heard of his son Philip; but they have heard of him only as a bigot who opposed the Reformation in Flanders, and invaded England. A history of his reign has been published, which is a very excellent history of the Netherlands during that period, but nothing more.⁸

However, in his own choices, Dallas does not resort to those unknown parts of Spanish history, but stays within the conventions that were already familiar to his British readers. He turned to the fanatic Philip II, setting out his novel to be an in-depth and contemporary look at the Black Legend, where the Inquisition and the material, moral and sexual corruption of the clergy would play a key role. The most curious thing, then, is that the novel

7 *Vargas*, I, p. 8.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 7.

delves into key territories of Hispanophobia, but justifies this by taking a Hispanophilic approach. This is reflective of the change that has occurred in Dallas since the publication of *Felix Alvarez*: five years had passed, but he had undergone a conversion to evangelism.

The historical event that frames the plot was the rise of the Aragonese against Philip II in 1590, on the occasion of the persecution of his Secretary of State Antonio Pérez.⁹ The conflict is outlined just as it was usually interpreted in the early nineteenth century: a struggle between monarchical despotism and inquisitorial tyranny, on the one hand, and, on the other, the freedoms guaranteed by old Aragonese laws. In the early modern period, this opposition between ancient freedom and oppressive tyranny was also deployed by English and Dutch authors writing about Antonio Pérez and about the Dutch Revolt in general. Philip is depicted as a vengeful, treacherous and vile despot. This episode in Spanish history evokes an event known throughout Europe and that was fundamental in conveying a negative image of Spain across the continent. But it is covered in only two chapters (the second and the third), which serve as a link to the fictitious plot. Then, the last three chapters return to the events in Zaragoza, which thus act as a general frame into which the specific story of the characters is inserted. A large part of the story is set in Seville, where the evil archbishop has kidnapped the virtuous maiden Cornelia Bohorquia and has incarcerated her in premises used by the Inquisition in an attempt to force her to submit to his libidinous desires. The entire story takes place between Seville and Extremadura, territories Dallas travelled through during the military campaigns of 1812 and 1813.

Vargas, a figure divided between two identities

My approach to *Vargas* focuses on the articulation of an image of Spain, but it will also be beneficial to address another point of interest: its similarities with and divergences from Walter Scott's historical-novel model, first beginning in 1814 with *Waverley*, and therefore close in time to Dallas's novels. *Vargas* links for the first time Scott's model with Spanish historical material, since it predates the five novels written in English between 1825 and 1834 by the exiles Valentín de Llanos and Telesforo de Trueba. Dallas's novels have points of convergence with Scott's, especially in the conception of local colour, the search for a certain descriptive lyricism in their styles,

9 In reality it was in 1591.

the combination of real historical events with romantic storylines, the conception of history as a struggle between tradition and progress embodied in divided communities, the extensive use of humour, etc. Moreover, we should also list what separates Dallas from Scott: in Scott's work, we find solid structural unity centred around a principal plot, while Dallas's novels are characterized by a disperse and cumulative structure, which tends to combine disparate and sometimes disjointed elements: digressions, poems, subplots, and so on. Nevertheless, this disconnection of elements is much more evident in *Felix Alvarez* than in *Vargas*, which results in an advance towards a more cohesive narrative.

Similarities to Scott are evident in the articulation of the characters: the 'middle hero' (Bartolomé Vargas), the romantic hero (Diego Meneses), the persecuted lady (Cornelia, a barely developed, very flat and functional character), and the evil nemesis (the archbishop), as well as the popular comic figures that offer local colour, dramatic distension and humour (Perico, Father Cacafato, the muleteers and innkeepers, the servants of the Count of Alange, the Gypsy Churipample, etc.). The central character is Vargas. Dallas addresses the religious conflict through a figure divided between two identities, as is often the norm in Scott's work: a 'middle hero' who is not a representation of any actual historical figures, but who represents the society of his time; he has no great personal peculiarities or heroic virtues, but his vicissitude places him in the midst of the crises and changes experienced by the nation, partially participating in the new and the old.

The protagonist in *Felix Alvarez* is a young, forward-thinking Spaniard, who joined the British army in the war against Napoleon, going on to become the liaison between the two countries: a Spanish patriot who sees his country from the perspective of an Englishman, which allows the public to identify with him. In *Vargas*, there is also a change in identity: Bartolomé Vargas is a Spaniard who converted to Protestantism in England, a friend and defender of the secretary of state, Antonio Pérez, during the events called the Alteraciones de Zaragoza (Zaragoza Riots). An orphan of noble birth, he had been raised in Seville by the Marquis of Bohorquia, thus, from his very beginnings, an outsider. He grew up with Cornelia, the marquis's daughter, whom he infected with his thirst for knowledge and a leaning towards reasoning, as he was studying in a Sevillian school in order to later be ordained. In all his studies, Vargas could not find answers to his questions. He came to recognize the inconsistencies in Catholic theology, which made him lose his faith, while the Marquis of Bohorquia was a fanatic ruled by the Archbishop of Seville. Vargas then decided not to be ordained into the Church, but the marquis

forced him to choose between being ordained or being denounced to the Inquisition as a heretic. Vargas and Cornelia declared that they were in love, but he then fled from Seville to England. There he attended Anglican services so as not to appear Catholic, and to avoid any hostility. He was moved by the austerity of the services almost immediately, the simplicity of the liturgy and the solemnity of its Christian message, as opposed to:

the pompous decorations, and what he now looked upon as ridiculous emblems, which crowded the chapels of the cathedral at Seville, and to which he had been so long accustomed and enslaved.¹⁰

The reading of the Bible and the teachings of a theologian did the rest: '[H]e became in a short time a sincere and earnest Protestant upon the conviction of his reason' (I, 261). He returned to Seville to convert Cornelia to the faith he now believed to be the one true faith and they married in secret. When Vargas asked the Archbishop of Seville – the novel's villain – for help, the archbishop convinced Vargas that he was actually the marquis's biological son, and so Cornelia's brother. Thus, the archbishop managed to rid himself of a rival in his desire to secure the young woman for himself. Vargas flees and the archbishop orchestrates Cornelia's arrest by the Inquisition. In Zaragoza, Vargas's story will converge with that of Antonio Pérez; returning from Aragon to Seville he meets Diego Meneses in Extremadura, who will help him with the task of freeing Cornelia, an event which takes place in the second half of the novel, with melodramatic and implausible plot twists that are not worth mentioning. Meneses had been the husband chosen for Cornelia by the marquis, and, unlike Vargas, he was not a middle hero, but a romantic and idealistic gentleman, fully integrated into the values of Spanish society, which he carries out with a sense of honour and justice. This duplication of the hero is also frequent in Scott's novels.

Spanish manners

While in *Felix Alvarez* Dallas was eager to tell his readers of the peculiarities of Spanish life, in *Vargas*, he limited himself to a small number of these, and almost never extended his 'ethnological' commentary. As such, it is easy to list what was noted: the habit of *siesta* and its influence on daily schedules (I, 18); the consumption of chocolate (I, 109); the habits and loquacity of

¹⁰ *Vargas*, I, pp. 256-257.

mozos de posta (grooms) (I, 128) and *arrieros* (muleteers) (I, 297); bunk cars pulled by mules (II, 120)¹¹; the length and shape of women's petticoats (I, 182); the reference and explanation of sayings and phrases; the transporting of wine in *borrachas* (pig skins) (I, 202); a bizarre feast featuring melon, watermelon, salad and *olla* (pot), stewed birds, olives for dessert, as well as the corresponding wines, of which Dallas praises the quality and the moderation of the Spaniards in their consumption (II, 15); the homes with bars over lower-floor windows and flat roofs (*azoteas*) (II, 266); the characteristics of the Spanish Gypsies and their skills as *metedores* or smugglers (III, 37); the *fandangos* and dances of the Sevillian Gypsies (III, 65); the popularity of 'pine nuts' (III, 133); a party in Zufre with rural sports (III, 167).¹² Sometimes these elements were combined in larger sequences. In the style of Scott, much more present as a model in *Vargas* than in *Felix Alvarez*, Dallas constructs long scenes that evoke the liveliness of everyday life: buildings, furniture, food, conversations and a lot of local colour. Examples include a banquet in the castle of the Count of Alange (Chapter XI), the description of the Master Rock Inn (Chapter XV) and the vivid narration of the San Marcos festival in Llerena and a procession in Montemolín (Chapters XIX-XX).

Poetic interludes and descriptions of picturesque landscapes are another feature of Dallas's style, endowing the storyline with local colour: a poem to the Ebro River (I, 121); a description of the Campo de Alange, with its mountains, valleys and castles (I, 138); the short verses in English or translated from Spanish that serve as the motto of each chapter; the wild landscape of the Saracen's Scymitar, where the hermitage of Father Lawrence stands; a number of songs inserted in the subplot related to this anchorite (Chapter XVI), which include a *tirana* and a burlesque song against the Discalced Carmelite friars; allusions to flamenco dancing (Chapter XXIV); a sailors' song that was sung during the escape down the Guadalquivir River after Cornelia's rescue (III, 105); the landscapes of Sierra Morena when heading

11 Dallas often presents, as amusing examples of popular customs, anecdotes about the muleteers, grooms, etc., and tells of actual events at the inns and on the roads, with mules and horses. As an officer of the Commissariat Department of the Treasury in the British Army, his daily duties in Spain consisted of buying and transporting supplies, and he had to deal with that class of people on a continuous basis.

12 Sometimes a comparison makes the task easier for English readers. When a herald sounds a ridiculous bugle to announce the arrival of his master, it is reminiscent of an Oxfordian custom: 'An Oxonian reader will have the identical tone in his imagination, if he only remember the scaring sound which startles the students at Queen's, as its cracked dissonance echoes along the cloisters to call them to *battel'* (*Vargas*, II, p. 7). And the bunk cars are also compared, due to their unsafe nature, to 'one of the new opposition London coaches when it is loaded four inside and fourteen out, and whirling over ten miles in a hour' (*Vargas*, II, p. 120).

upstream on the Rivera River in Huelva (III, 127); and the peasants' songs in Zufre (III, 170). Once again, these interludes are much more infrequent in *Vargas* than in *Felix Alvarez*.

Exoticism is not decidedly favourable and does not always have to create a positive image of the country, and it frequently does not do so. However, in Dallas, local colour corresponds to his fascination for the shape of Spanish life, and in a certain way to the memory of an adventuresome youth, from which he already felt distanced in 1822. Although more coloured in *Vargas* with condescension towards a society he considers inferior, the view of national customs continues to express his unqualified Hispanophilia, as when in *Felix Alvarez* he describes the Spanish fondness for festivals, songs, and celebrations, which he does not depict as the softness of a decadent community, but instead declares that 'the Englishmen could not comprehend the unextinguishable gaiety of the Spaniard' (II, 190). Nevertheless, in *Vargas*, all these favourable and empathetic mentions of Spanish culture and territory, scarcer and more rationed than in Dallas's previous books, are unable to offer opposition to the other less favourable elements of the image conjured of Spain, which I will analyse next.

A shadow of chivalry

There is no shortage of derogatory tales concerning the Spanish nobility that had held free reign in England during the two previous centuries, and that were very blurred in *Felix Alvarez*. The character of Félix Dávila is linked to a satirical study of a 'Spanish Don', a petulant nobleman with an exaggerated sense of both honour and self-importance, full of ridiculous features that often appeared in caricatures, engravings and English literary works. This image of the vain and haughty Spaniard was a well-known stereotype in early modern Europe: Dávila had a poetic affliction, courted a number of ladies in Madrid and had fought a duel for a petty reason. His pedantry matched his vanity as an aristocrat, so when his uncle, the Count of Alange, asks him to announce his visit to Vargas, who is under his hospitality, he replies:

Bid your herald precede me, Señor Conde, that I may go upon a knightly message in a knightly manner. Send forth thy cracked clarion's shrill voice, sir herald, that it may set my wit on edge to compose an oration equally befitting my character for eloquence, and the Conde's for courtesy.¹³

¹³ *Vargas*, II, p. 6.

The snobby parliament and Dávila's outlandish ways – Vargas believes he is standing before a 'mockery' (II, 9) – would be the satirical side (Hispanophobic) of the Spanish knights, but Dallas also falls into the opposite side (Hispanophilic), seeing in Spain the preservation of a medieval knightly spirit. Thus, Spain is conventionally qualified as 'the country of chivalry' (I, 148-149). Vargas and Meneses are the embodiment of these noble values; and in this way, both swear to free Cornelia:

Then taking off his sword, he continued, 'With this sword my father's father fought the enemies of the Catholic religion and the Catholic country, under the Great Captain at Grenada at an Naples; with this sword my father defended the same cause, by the side of Alva in France, and in Flanders: in the hands of their descendant it has done nothing but defend his own honour and his life [...].'

Vargas immediately reached his sword [...]; and, kissing the cross of it, he handed it to Meneses; who, placing it to his lips as he received it, presented his own to Vargas. The age of chivalry was over, and the chivalrous feeling which had gradually dwindled from the reigns of Alphonso the Wise, and John of Aragon, through those of Ferdinand the Catholic, and Charles, was almost extinct in that of Philip; a shadow of it was indeed kept alive in the warm imaginations of the youth of Spain, through the forced medium of romance, until Cervantes appeared to banish it altogether, by the power of common sense armed with the arrows of wit. At the time when Vargas and Meneses met, however, [...] the power of chivalry had still a perceptible effect upon the society of the country in which it had so long held its court.¹⁴

And if Cervantes is conventionally mentioned as the rational mind that put an end to chivalry, there is no shortage of the literary references that represent its permanence:

Meneses [...] was one of those high spirited cavalleros of whom Lope and Calderon have given so many portraits, who make the point of honour the strict rule of conduct, deriving its principal zest from the scenes of intrigue and danger into which it most frequently leads them.¹⁵

14 Ibid., pp. 82-83.

15 Ibid., pp. 84-85. For the connection between Cervantes and criticism on chivalry as a Spanish way of life, see Pardo's contribution in this volume.

Similarly, when detailing the medieval castle in Alange where a part of the action in the first volume of the novel takes place, the seductive oriental image of Spain appears:

The old Moorish castle, said to have been one of the earliest built after the fatal battle of Xeres, had long been chosen by the framers of imaginary records as the scene of many legendary horrors. Its time-coloured turrets rose high above the thick-set trees that partially clothed the acclivity upon which they stood, and suggested a sombre idea in perfect keeping with the dark deeds that were said to have been perpetrated within them.¹⁶

Dallas only suggests a version of the wars of Moors and Christians, without endorsing those imaginary chronicles made up by writers. In other parts of the tale he mentions stories of ghosts or enchantments, but always in a satirical tone that makes it clear that only irrational beings with little culture believe in them. He does not seek out the exoticism that Gothic or Moorish imagery provides, unlike many of the European writers in those decades, because he did not want to deviate from a realistic and credible narration, removed from fantasy.¹⁷ And this is why throughout the novel, Dallas claims to be an historian, insisting on the veracity of what is narrated and, therefore, on its effectiveness so that the reader is exposed to the truth of Spain, and not mere legends. Dallas emphasized this in one of the most extensive excerpts, when the plot takes Vargas to a festivity in Llerena that combines religious superstitions and bullfighting, a conflation of Spanish customs, manners and ideology:

Having said thus much, to secure my character from the suspicion of being tintured with a traveller's talent, I will leave my industrious readers to examine my authorities, promising them beforehand that their reward will amply recompense the trouble; and my indolent readers to take my correctness for granted, assuring them that they may do so with safety.¹⁸

From this notion, the supposed miracle of San Marcos where each year a fierce bull is tamed turns out to be a deception carried out by the local

16 *Vargas*, I, p. 184.

17 As will be indicated later, the Gothic element in *Vargas* is very present in regard to what surrounds the Inquisition and the description of its halls, but it barely appears in other aspects of the novel, although López Santos, who includes the work in his list of 'Gothic Spanish novels', maintains the opposite.

18 *Vargas*, II, pp. 243-244.

clergy, who had gotten the animal drunk beforehand. His Spain, then, is not a country of legends or a space for fantasy. This allows him to draw a more deliberate critical analysis of Spanish life, especially in regard to the religious aspect.

The recesses of the Inquisition

The central part develops the main mechanism of the old literary Hispanophobia: the evils of the Inquisition, without which no evocation of Spanish history would seem complete or credible. So begins Chapter XIV:

While Meneses is making the best of his way to Seville, the reader shall get there before him, and be admitted into the recesses of the palace of the Inquisition, by means of the powerful master-key of an historian.¹⁹

With that supposed key, one can enter the secret prisons and the courtroom, in the judicial paraphernalia described in a way that is as exhaustive as imaginative.²⁰ The court acts as an instrument at the service of the passions of the Archbishop of Seville, who 'had early fallen into the hands of the most degraded of the degraded clergy at that unhappy period of the history of Christianity' (II, 107). All vices and sins, even atheism, can be found in this evil character.

In Chapter XVIII, Dallas, speaking through Cornelius Villiers, goes over the tortures carried out by the Inquisition in great detail, offering a historical lesson of the evils of Catholicism. The novelist unabashedly transforms

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 89.

²⁰ In his account about the mysteries of the Inquisition, *Vargas* includes elements, such as the masked judges, who have no support in the Inquisitorial literary tradition, but which Muñoz Sempere believes is taken from *The Italian*, by Ann Radcliffe: 'En *Vargas* existe ya una voluntad estilística cercana a la presente en la ficción gótica inglesa. La representación inicial de los inquisidores es mucho más terrorífica que en la *Cornelia Bororquia*, la deshumanización mucho más extrema y el elemento erótico-sádico de una brutalidad chocante' (*La Inquisición*, p. 141; my translation: 'In *Vargas* a stylistic attitude close to that of the English Gothic fiction is to be perceived. The initial representation of Inquisitors is much more terrifying than in *Cornelia Bororquia*, the dehumanization much more extreme and the sadic-erotic element brutally shocking'). Comparisons of the two novels are frequent in their own critical bibliography, founded on *Vargas*'s wrong attribution; for a reading assuming the real authorship, see Meyer: 'I want to show how *Vargas* adapts this grim, late-Enlightenment *roman à thèse* to revive interest in Spain for a late Romanticism English public, ignorant and dismissive of Spain after the Peninsular War' (*Vargas*, p. 4).

himself into a Protestant apologist, into a preacher who persuades his readers that such crimes are not the fictions of sensationalist writers, but truths that harbour an important teaching:

Scenes have been acted in the Palace of the Inquisition which, Heaven be praised, cannot be re-acted now; and the possibility of which it may at first perhaps be difficult to conceive, but which, alas, are neither untrue nor exaggerated. Some of the crimes recorded of the Inquisition even so far exceed the common depth of the depravity of our nature, wretched as it is, that we might be allowed to doubt the best authenticated historian, if there were not existing undeniable indications of their truth, in the convincing remains of that monstrous engine of fanaticism which have been handed down to us. Praised be Providence, by the light which the Reformation has shed over the whole Christian world, either direct or reflected, the growth of religious despotism, which thrives in darkness, has been stunted; and it is only by the instruments of torture which still exist in the dungeons of the Inquisition, that we are able to form an idea of the magnitude to which the monster had grown during the dark days.²¹

These are the dungeons and torture rooms of the Inquisitorial Court of Seville that Cornelius Villiers (that is, Alexander Dallas) personally visited during the Peninsular War. Although the novel takes place in the sixteenth century, proof of the conviction that nothing is false or exaggerated lies in its perseverance into the nineteenth century. Thus, contemporary Spain is a sort of open-air archaeological site of the history of religious despotism, which in civilized Europe had been defeated by the Reformation.

'I have been in Seville, good reader, and I have walked through the palace of the Inquisition there' (II, 213). Cornelius Villiers's visits to the premises used by the Inquisition in 1812, and the meticulous descriptions of their torture devices, links historic Spain to contemporary Spain, which at that point become identical. This journey through time unites Dallas's experiences during the war and the story of Bartolomé Vargas in 1590 – it is the *raison d'être* of the novel, its justification as a literary act and as an ideological manifesto. Ultimately, aside from Hispanophilia, from the people, literature, weather, music and customs, for Dallas, Spain once again ends up as the country of the Inquisition, which the English can use to show pride in their own society.

21 *Vargas*, II, pp. 211-213.

Superstitions

In *Vargas*, not only does a degraded vision of the Church emerge through its prelates and inquisitors, but also that of popular religiosity and the most quotidian customs. This range of religious censure is displayed in three figures respectively representing the high clergy and the Inquisition (the Archbishop of Seville), the low secular clergy (Father Cacafuto) and the regular clergy, those secluded from the world (Father Lawrence). Thus, the reader finds sharp satires about the cult of saints and miracles, such as in Chapter XIX, dedicated to the narration of – with ethnological interest and religious reprobation – the festival of the ‘bull of San Marcos’, with its ‘miraculous’ rites, which he has documented in texts by Feijoo and other authors. This episode is one of the few times in which both the narrator and the character adopt a moralistic tone, spewing fiery anti-Catholic speech. The storyline moves off-topic for a moment to denounce, in a timeless rather than historical way, the ‘errors’ of the religious cult in Spain. The three following chapters include the narration of a procession in Montemolín, with profuse examples of idolatry towards the friars and hermits, funerary customs, worship of miracles, the sacrament of confession, etc., constituting a long sequence on popular religious customs. The reflection the character makes could not be more categorical:

Nor could he forbear pitying the incurable blindness of the degraded minds around him there and every where else in his unhappy country. Everything acted from one spring – superstition; every thing not tangible was miraculous; every misfortune was by diabolical agency; nothing was too monstrous to be believed; nothing was too idolatrous to be practised.²²

These references to Catholic ‘superstitions’ are scattered throughout the novel, where passages can be found about the way names are given to children (I, 168), or about the effect of the viaticum on the streets of Seville (III, 68). In the house of the Count of Alange, there is no shortage of wives disturbed by religious obsessions and dominated by a confessor, and a good-natured chaplain who represents the vices of the lower clergy.²³ Everything that surrounds Father Cacafuto is an example of anti-clerical humour, highlighting

²² *Ibid.*, p. 296.

²³ Another character very much in the vein of Scott: ‘He was a good-natured round little man, a good Catholic, a good priest, and a good fellow; for he believed every thing, he absolved every thing, and he eat and drank every thing’ (*Vargas*, I, p. 167).

the corrupt and mistaken customs that Protestants attribute to Catholic countries. The breach of the vows of chastity, the obsession with miracles, the small and great superstitions of the cult, the belief in the intercession of the saints as a remedy for all ills, and the clergy's gluttony and ignorance are all brought to light; there are even veiled sexual allusions, which serve as a humorous correlate to the central theme around the archbishop's lust.²⁴

Father Lawrence serves to condemn the asceticism and mortification of monks and anchorites, as well as the belief in miracles and the custom of erecting crosses where crimes have occurred (II, 40-77, 162-ss), the sale of indulgences (II, 169) and the safe refuge that criminals find in temples (II, 167). When Lawrence hears Vargas express Protestant ideas, he confuses him with the devil and sprinkles him with holy water, pronouncing an exorcism. The misguided foolish anchorite is thus characterized as an 'inflamed and bigoted priest' (II, 191). In reality, his tiny hermitage on the steep cliffs of the Alange Crag (Peña de Alange), like the dungeon of the Inquisition in Seville, operates as a metaphor for Catholic Spain: superstitious, crazed, removed from reality and time, almost inaccessible to outsiders and trapped by its own mistakes. When a foreigner – and Vargas is as foreign in that Spain as any Englishman – challenges him, he reacts with a scandal bordering on madness.

Phobias and philias

The selection of material on Spanish manners and customs, both in quantity and in quality, and its scattering amongst the more critical ideological aspects, articulate a vision of Spain that is much more negative than in Dallas's previous books, which allows Lawless to affirm:

His lengthy, and, as far as plot is concerned, irrelevant, descriptions of sixteenth-century Spanish life create an impression of a corrupt, ridiculous, tyrannical, and often dirty, society, with filthy *posadas*, corrupt officials.²⁵

Thus, what in *Felix Alvarez* produced a certain result, once placed in a different context and with a different frequency, produces the opposite result.

24 Vicente Llorens has pointed out that this anticlerical criticism is radically different in tone and content from that made by Blanco White (Durán López, 'Algo más sobre la infundada atribución', p. 487).

25 Lawless, 'Opposing Strategies', p. 206.

Because on this occasion, these customs are linked to the underlying ills of society and not only to a superficial exoticism. In a passage from *Vargas*, he describes with notorious contempt the position adopted by women and friars in Spain to pray the rosary in such a way as to feign suffering while being comfortable at the same time. The narrator's comment serves to explain almost all the Spanish customs mentioned throughout the text:

This half-sitting half-kneeling posture conveniently quiets the conscience and relieves the muscles, and has therefore been adopted by all the indolently pious people in the Catholic country, who, being the majority, it has become characteristic.²⁶

On this plane, any kind of sympathy Dallas once had for Spain disappears: what he sees is an indolent people, dragged along by routine and unable to rationally critique their customs and beliefs. Everyone follows the majority, and the majority is dominated by an error that they are not even able to understand. Therefore, whoever becomes a censor or an agent of progress is condemned to act from outside the Spanish identity, fighting against society and not in complicity with it. This is illustrated when Vargas accuses Lawrence of practising a corrupt piety, and is stripped down to his essential truth by the narrator:

Vargas imprudently permitted his feelings to carry him far beyond what any man in his senses, and who valued his liberty and his life, dared to have uttered, between the peaks of the Pyrennees and the shores of the Atlantic.²⁷

Vargas, then, is an impossible Spaniard, because between the Pyrenees and the Atlantic, there was no Spaniard who could think and speak as he did. In *Felix Alvarez*, the hero, to be able to be so, had to metamorphose into an anglicized Spaniard. Here too, the hero can be a true Christian only by fleeing Spain. That dilemma comes to a head when, in Chapter XIX, the protagonist comes face to face with a crowd in the midst of the festivities of San Marcos in Llerena. He attempts to persuade them of the religious deception being perpetrated on them, but finds himself barely able to save his own life: 'Vargas's last words were lost in the clamours of the people, and the curses of the priests: a hundred zealous Estremeñas [sic] rushed

²⁶ *Vargas*, III, p. 214.

²⁷ *Vargas*, II, pp. 187-188.

towards him' (II, 266). Dallas has turned Bartolomé Vargas into an activist, assimilating him to the Protestant 'martyrs' who fought in the sixteenth century to introduce the Reformation in Spain. A noble struggle impossible to win. This is why Vargas, in the end, has to take refuge in Protestant Europe, renouncing his Spanish rights, since 'after what had taken place at Seville, no corner of Spain was secure to him' (III, 274).

Now, Vargas's rebelliousness and true faith had been born entirely in England. Had he not lived in London, he would not have abandoned his inherited mistakes and he would have remained somewhere between superstition and atheism, the only alternative that the Protestant view admits for a Catholic society. This is not just a religious change, but also a political one:

He [Vargas] had acquired a just idea of liberty in England, and had been fond of speculating upon the possibility that his countrymen might throw off the yoke of despotism and bigotry which bowed them down.²⁸

It is England and Protestantism that lend to Vargas the idea of freedom and allow him to distance himself from religious fanaticism. From a European point of view, any salvation of Spain can come only from the outside, from the assimilation of the progress already experienced in more advanced countries. At that point, there is a convergence between Hispanophilia (the faith in the possibility of change) and Hispanophobia (the conviction of the toxic character of the Spanish identity), and both share the systematic awareness of the superiority of northern countries with respect to Spain. This is worth highlighting, because often the discussion about the image of Spain revolves too much around the axis of sympathy-antipathy, love-hate, while in fact, there is a broad common foundation of paternalism in regard to the favourable and unfavourable views of Spain. This is why the dialogue between what provokes either love or hate for Spain is so fluid and so complex. The work of Dallas is a magnificent example of how Hispanophobic and Hispanophilic elements can be combined or alternated, and if this is so, it is because these elements share much more than may be visible at first glance. After all, in the image of the Spain of those decades – centuries? – the philias and phobias merge in the same attitude: condescension.²⁹

²⁸ *Vargas*, I, p. 302.

²⁹ *Vargas* had moderate critical reception. A brief note in *The New Monthly Magazine. Historical Register* (vol. VI, no. XXII [1 October 1822], p. 461) highlights that it 'delineates the manners of Spain, and is connected in its subject with Spanish history', and criticizes the author's fictional

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incompetence. *The Monthly Review* (vol. I, no. XCIX [November 1822], pp. 252-257), published a favourable article about this 'spirited and amusing novel', where the author insists on the relevance of the argument and comments on the Inquisitorial plot, the character of the archbishop and the description of the Gypsies, and warns that the novel will not inform the public about modern Spanish customs. John Gibson Lockhart wrote the longest review in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* (vol. XII, no. LXXI [December 1822], pp. 730-740), stressing the author's knowledge of ancient Spanish customs, his poor narrative skills and some literary merits in his imitation of Scott's novels. He quotes long fragments about the festivities of Llerena and the final punishment of the archbishop. One of the main arguments for the attribution to Blanco White is this review, whose second paragraph raises questions about whether the author of *Vargas* could be the same as that of *Letters from Spain*. It has been taken for granted by everyone that in 1822, Lockhart knew that the person who signed the *Letters* as 'Leucadio Doblado' was in fact Blanco White. No one has noticed that the first paragraph regrets how many young British officers had gone to the Peninsular War without learning anything about Spain or writing about it. Perhaps Lockhart was suggesting that the author of *Vargas* was the exception. From the combination of the two paragraphs, it could be interpreted that Lockhart suspected that 'Leucadio Doblado' and 'Cornelius Villiers' were the same person, the former combatant in Spain, Alexander Dallas.

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