Literature and Freedom

Mario Vargas Llosa

In this CIS Occasional Paper, Mario Vargas Llosa highlights the mutually beneficial relationship between literature and freedom. Where freedom does not exist, censorship and self-censorship stifle creativity – literature tends to become conformist and predictable. Colonial Latin America produced scarcely a writer still worth reading in three hundred years, while in Elizabethan England disdain for dramatists saw them left in peace, allowing Shakespeare's genius to flourish. In repressive societies, though, the book is the medium best suited to keeping freedom alive. Audio visual technology is expensive and easily controlled by those in power. Books, by contrast, can be written, reproduced and circulated by underground cultures. While praising good cinema and television, Vargas Llosa emphasises the book's unique contribution to culture and freedom.

Mario Vargas Llosa, born in 1936, is one of the most acclaimed Latin American writers. His books include *Conversation in the Cathedral*(1969), *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* (1977), and *In Praise of the Stepmother* (1988). His autobiography will be published in English translation in 1994 under the title *Like a Fish in Water*. In 1993 he gave the CIS's tenth John Bonython Lecture, entitled *Questions of Conquest and Culture* (OP47). In 1990 he ran unsuccessfully for the Presidency of Peru. He recently acquired dual citizenship of Spain and Peru, and now lives in Europe.

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Foreword

Mario Vargas Llosa ~ The Writer and the Word

Together with the Argentinian Jorge Luis Borges and the Colombian Gabriel García Márquez, the Peruvian Mario Vargas Llosa has dominated the field of Latin American literature for the last thirty years.

However, no Latin American, or indeed Hispanic writer, has had such a world–wide audience nor such an international impact through the power of the spoken and the written word as Vargas Llosa.

His written output has been nothing short of prolific. Since *The City and the Dogs* appeared in 1963, he has published eleven other novels, four plays, a three volume collection of essays and articles, four books of literary criticism and numerous introductions and prologues to books by other writers. He has filled hundreds, not to say thousands of pages of journals and newspapers with his syndicated columns and articles on topics ranging from jogging and animal liberation to Jane Austen, feminism, chaos theory, the conquest of 1492, Aboriginal songlines and the *Mabo* debate. He has also managed to turn out film reviews, film scripts and documentaries, to research and host his own TV show and to interview the powerful and the famous for the popular press. All his novels and many of his other writings have been translated into almost every major language in the world. As a 'vargasllosólogo' (a Vargas Llosa specialist) recently put it, 'And the Word was made Mario'.

As if all this were not enough, after almost three years of frenetic political activity in the cauldron of Peruvian politics, in 1990 Mario Vargas Llosa ran for the presidency of his country, losing in the second round to Alberto Fujimori. After his defeat, Vargas Llosa went into virtual exile in Berlin, where he completed his memoirs, *Like a Fish in Water* (1993). Back once again in his element – words and writing – Vargas Llosa tells with rare candour how as a politician he was a hopeful innocent who dared to presume that he could swim 'against the current' in the murky waters of politics by telling the electorate the truth about his radical free market 'shock' treatment for Peru's economy.

In recounting his incursion into the political fray with all the skill of the master novelist that he is, Vargas Llosa comes to two conclusions. Firstly, that truth has no place in real life, and certainly not in the venal, violent, hypocritical, self-seeking labyrinth of Peruvian politics,

where he was genuinely 'like a fish out of water'. Rather, and as paradoxical as it may seem, truth resides in the lies of fiction, where a novelist or playwright or storyteller can tell through the inviolate freedom of his imagination his own personal truth, his most intimate dreams and fantasies, the secret side of history – what Balzac called 'the private history of nations'.

Secondly, in his memoirs Vargas Llosa concludes what all of us who have followed his career could have told him : that he is quintessentially a storyteller and a writer, one of that rare breed whose origins are shrouded in the mists of time when a caveman first decided to tell a story to an enthralled audience. His forebears include the *jongleurs* recounting the deeds of Charlemagne and the feats of Merlin in a medieval square, the Irish *seanchaí,* the Aboriginal ancestors who sang the creation of the land, the Spanish chroniclers who first described the magical reality of the Amazon and the Andes, Homer, Shakespeare, Dickens, Flaubert, Faulkner, Patrick White. Vargas Llosa belongs to that long line of storytellers who weave their verbal magic to entertain and amuse us with fictional lies that at the same time open our eyes to truths we cannot see, or do not want to see.

During his visit to Australia in September 1993 under the auspices of the Centre for Independent Studies, Mario Vargas Llosa gave a series of lectures and seminars in which he confirmed that he had indeed rediscovered his origins as a writer. In a lecture entitled 'Literature and Freedom' delivered to the CIS/*Sydney Morning Herald*/Dymocks Literary Luncheon on Friday 10 September, and which we reproduce in this Occasional Paper, he warns against the 'robotisation' of culture as a result of the technological world's increasingly obsessive reliance on audio-visual gadgetry which can be all too easily controlled and manipulated by financial moguls, scheming politicians and ultimately the state.

The best antidote against such an Orwellian prospect, he declares, is the culture of books and literature, where, through the sovereign power of fantasy and the exercise of the individual imagination, a reader can enter into a pact with the writer to prevent technology and those who finance and control it from turning us into their 'robot citizens'. Coming from one of the great champions of liberty in the Western world, maybe this is a warning which we should heed.

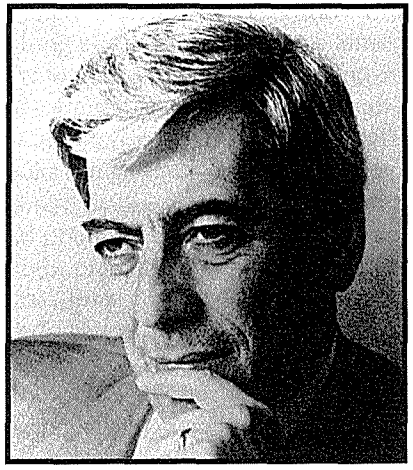
Roy C. Boland
Professor of Spanish
La Trobe University

About the Author

Mario Vargas Llosa, born in 1936, undertook his schooling and studies in Bolivia, Peru and Spain, and obtained a doctorate from the University of Madrid. While working as a journalist, he became known to a wider audience with his book *The City and the Dogs* (1963), which won him several literary prizes and was translated into 21 languages. Other books and plays followed, and he is now one of the most acclaimed writers in Latin America. His works include *The City and the Dogs* (1963), *The Green House* (1966), *Conversation in The Cathedral* (1969), *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* (1977), *The Storyteller* (1987), and *In Praise of the Stepmother* (1988). His autobiography will be published in English translation in 1994, under the title *Like a Fish in Water: A Memoir.*

In 1987, he joined friends in starting a citizens' campaign in defence of private banking, and economic and political liberty generally. In 1990, as head of a liberal-conservative coalition, he stood for election to the Presidency of Peru. He won a plurality of the votes in the first round, but was defeated in the second round by Alberto Fujimori, who subsequently staged a coup against himself to claim dictatorial powers.

Mario Vargas Llosa recently acquired dual citizenship of Spain and Peru, and now lives in Europe. He delivered the 10th John Bonython Lecture for the Centre for Independent Studies in September 1993.



Literature and Freedom

Mario Vargas Llosa

Nothing has pushed forward cultural life as much as the invention of printing, nor has anything contributed more to its democratisation. From Gutenberg's times until today, the book has been the best propeller and depository of knowledge, as well as an irreplaceable source of pleasure.

However, to many, its future is uncertain. I recall a lecture I heard at Cambridge a few years ago. It was entitled 'Literature is Doomed' and its thesis was that the alphabetic culture, the one based on writing and books, is perishing. According to the lecturer, audiovisual culture will soon replace it. The written word, and whatever it represents, is already an anachronism, since the more avant-garde and urgent knowledge required for the experience of our time is transmitted and stored not in books but in machines, and has signals and not letters as its tools. The lecturer had spent two weeks in Mexico where he had travelled everywhere, and even in the underground he had no difficulty, though he spoke no Spanish, because the entire system of instructions in the Mexican underground consists of nothing but arrows, lights and figures. This way of communication is more universal, he explained, for it overcomes, for instance, language barriers, a problem congenital to the alphabetic system.

The lecturer drew all the right conclusions, with no fear, from his thesis. He maintained that all Third World countries, instead of persisting in those long and costly campaigns aimed at teaching their illiterate masses how to read and write, should introduce them to what will be the primordial source of knowledge: the handling of machines. The formula that the slender speaker used with a defiant wink still rings in my ears: 'Not books but gadgets'. And, as a consolation to all those who might be saddened by the prospect of a world in which what was yesterday made and obtained by writing and reading would be done and attained through projectors, screens, speakers and tapes, he reminded us that the alphabetic period in human history had in any case been short-lived. Just as in the past mankind had, for thousands of years, created splendid civilisations without books, so the same could happen in the future. Why, then, should the underdeveloped countries insist on imposing an obsolete education on their citizens? So

as to keep on being underdeveloped? The lecturer did not think the alphabetic culture would totally vanish, nor did he wish it. He forecast that the culture of the book would survive in certain university and intellectual enclaves for the entertainment and benefit of the marginal groups interested in producing and consuming it, as something curious and tangential to the main course of the life of nations.

The exponent of this thesis was not Marshall McLuhan, the Canadian prophet who announced the death of the book for 1980. It was Sir Edmund Leach, eminent British social anthropologist, then Provost of King's College: that is to say, a distinguished mandarin of the alphabetic culture of our time. We should not take such statements lightly. If Sir Edmund Leach thinks that the alphabet stinks, something in the alphabet must be rotten.

It is true that for many people the written word is becoming more and more dispensable. The most flagrant example is to be found among the children of our time, to whom television programs give what the novels of Karl May, Salgari, Jules Verne and the great Alexandre Dumas gave my generation. Radio and television have taken the place of newspapers and magazines as the main source of information on current affairs, and although the number of readers in the world is growing in absolute terms, there is no doubt that, relatively speaking, the printed word has less influence today than it had in the past. Books are less important to the literate people of today (considering the time they devote to them and the effect they have on their lives) than they were to the literate people of the past. We must be worried about this, because although I doubt that the prophecy of Professor Leach will materialise so soon, if it does come true it will probably be a disaster for humanity.

Literature as a Bastion of Freedom

My pessimism is based on two certainties. First, that the audiovisual culture is more easily controlled, manipulated and degraded by power than the written word. Because of the solitude in which it is born, the speed at which it can be reproduced and circulated, the secrecy with which it conveys its message and the lasting mark on people's consciousness of literary images, the written word has revealed a stubborn resistance against being enslaved. In all totalitarian and authoritarian societies, if there is dissidence it is through the written word that it manifests and keeps itself alive. In a good number of places, writing is the last bastion of freedom. With its demise, the submission of minds to political power could be total. In the kingdom

of the audiovisual, the master of technology and budget is the king of cultural production. And in a closed society, this means always, directly or indirectly, the state. He would decide what men should and should not learn, say, hear and (in the end) dream. There would be no underground culture, no counter-culture, no *samizdat.* This society, once personal choice and cultural activities are removed, would easily slip into mental slavery.

And the robot citizens of that world would probably also be dumb. Because, unlike books, the audiovisual product tends to limit imagination, to dull sensibility and create passive minds. I am not a retrograde, allergic to audiovisual culture. On the contrary. After literature I love nothing more than the cinema and I deeply enjoy a good television program. But the impact of the audiovisual never matches the effect of books on the spirit: it is ephemeral and the participation of the listener's or the spectator's intellect and fantasy is minimal compared with that of the reader's. Even in the few countries where television has reached a high level of creativity, the average program, that which sets the pattern, is cheap, its strategy being to embrace the widest audience running for the lowest common denominator.

I do not believe this to be accidental. Technology and budgets exert a strong coercive force on originality and can suffocate and destroy it by guiding it too rigidly. This is the reason why the most typical television product is the serial, like 'Dallas' or 'Dynasty', in which the director seems to be nothing more than a clever user (or servant) of those mighty tools: the economic and technical means. In this environment it is difficult, if not impossible, for the attitudes which mean rupture, radical criticism, absolute refusal of the status quo, to prosper. And these attitudes are behind many of the greatest intellectual and artistic achievements of civilisation.

The nature of culture (whether alphabetic or audiovisual, free or enslaved) does not stem from historical determinism, from the blind and impersonal evolution of science. The decisive factor will always be man's choice, the decision of powers which can drive society in one direction or another. If books and gadgets are caught in a deadly fight and the latter defeat the former, the responsibility will lie with those who chose to allow it to happen. But I do not think this Orwellian nightmare will really occur, precisely because our fate, as writers and readers, is linked to that illness or vice, also called freedom, caught by humanity rather late in history which affects a good part of mankind in apparently an incurable way.

Writing is a solitary business. Confronted with the piece of paper, pen in hand, so that what we call inspiration can pour out, one has no other choice but to isolate oneself from immediate life and plunge into the innermost universe of memory, nostalgia, secret desires, intuition and instinct, all ingredients that nourish the creative imagination. The process which gives birth to a fiction is long, difficult and fascinating. Although I have lived through this process many times since I wrote my first story, I have never really been able fully to understand it. I am not sure if this happens to all writers, but in my case at least, even though I try to be lucid when writing and attempt to exert a rational control over the story, characters, dialogues and landscape which appear as the words flow out, I can never avoid a certain darkness which, like a shadow, escorts the conscious task when one is writing a novel.

That element which rushes out spontaneously from the most secret corner of one's personality imposes a special colouring upon the story one is trying to write, establishes hierarchies among the characters which sometimes subtly overturn our conscious intention, adorns or impregnates that which we are narrating with a meaning or symbolism which, in some cases, not only does not coincide with our ideas but can even go so far as to substantially contradict them. The writer, the artist, is much more than mere intelligence, reason, ideas. He is also that shady region of one's personality which our consciousness is always repressing or ignoring. In the creative process, as in the magical exorcisms and healings of the primitive, that region manifests and imposes itself, restoring that completeness of the individual which, in almost all other social or private activities, appears cut off, reduced only to its conscious counterpart.

Perhaps because they are born from the associated effort of reason and unreason, of intellect and intuition, of the free flight of fantasy and the dark intentions of the unconscious, the products of art and literature possess that continuity which allows them gracefully to cross the centuries and the barriers of geography and language, maintaining the vigour and power which time, instead of spoiling, increases. The *peripeteia* of the gods and the men of ancient Greece, which a blind poet recited 3000 years ago, still dazzle us today and, just like those remote ancestors who hear them for the first time sung out by the rhapsodists, we too are vicariously made to experience those ceremonies of passion and adventure which evidently are eagerly desired by the human soul of every civilisation. The fire that Shakespeare lit when he recreated in his tragedies and comedies the Elizabethan universe, from the plebeian street gossip with its fresco of picturesque types and

its rich vulgarity, to the refined astuteness of the struggle for power of rulers and warriors, or the delicacies and torments of love and the feast of desire, still burns every time those stories materialise before us on a stage, embracing us, over time and distance, with their verbal enchantment. Brooding over the flesh-and-bone beings and the demons of his time, Shakespeare sketched certain images in which men of every era discover their own faces. This miracle would not have been possible if the old poet from the beginnings of Greek civilisation and the English playwright had not enjoyed, apart from their marvellous command of language and an incandescent imagination, the possibility of giving free rein to their private phantoms, letting them move around as they wished, and submitting to their dictates when confronted with the papyrus or the piece of paper.

The civilisation to which both of them belonged were repressive ones which managed to maintain themselves thanks to discrimination and the exploitation of the poor and the weak. But in the specific field in which Homer and Shakespeare operate, that of artistic creation, what we, making use of a modern concept, would call 'permissibility', was almost absolute. For the Greek the poet was a spokesman of the gods, an intermediary from the other world in whom the artistic and religious values were entwined in an indissoluble manner. How could a culture which, unlike ours, did not separate literature and art from morality and religion, the spirit from the body, have hindered the work of a man whose function was that of a priest and a seer as well as that of an illusionist? To that unconditional freedom enjoyed by the poet, the artist and the thinker – the bridges between men and gods, this world and the other – the Greek culture owes its particular development, that evolution which allowed it both to attain a prodigious richness of invention and knowledge in the fields of ideas, art and literature, and to fix a certain pattern of beauty and thought which changed the history of the world, imposing upon it a rationality from which the entire technical and scientific progress as well as the gradual humanisation of society were to derive.

Liberty, Reason and Passion

It has been said that the history of Greece represents the victory of reason over the irrational strait-jackets of pre-Christian civilisations. This may be true. But that triumphant awakening of reason over the thick veneer of superstitions and taboos, which was to precipitate the world towards its unstoppable development, would not have been possible without that latitude for thinking and creating which the

Hellenic culture allowed its philosophers and artists. The triumph of reason followed the triumph of liberty. Perhaps for the first time in the course of human history the poet was not a man simply in charge of putting rhythm and music to that which already existed – the legends and collective myths, the enthroned religion – and of illustrating in fables the established morality, but an independent individual, left to his own devices, authorised to explore the unknown by using imagination, introspection, desire and reason, and to open the doors of humanity to his private demons.

Shakespeare's genius could not have flourished without the unlimited freedom he had to show human passions (as Dr Johnson wrote) with the impunity that he did. Not all of his contemporaries, however, enjoyed this freedom. The Tudor era was not tolerant, but rather a despotic and brutal one, so much so that the historian G. B. Harrison, referring to the vandalic destructions of statues, images, paintings, architectural works and religious books which followed the first reforms of Henry VIII, has compared that age to Germany and the USSR under Hitler and Stalin. But drama was considered a vulgar and plebeian amusement, too far beneath the world of salons, academies and libraries where the prevailing culture was produced and preserved, to be worthy of the punctilious control which was exerted over religious or political texts, for example. Power, in the age of Elizabeth I, prohibited English historical works and also shut down theatres on several occasions. But fortunately the dramatists were disdained and left in peace, so that – still according to Harrison – the theatre of London was the only place where the common man could hear direct and honest commentaries about life. No one made better use than Shakespeare of this accidental privilege granted to dramatists in Elizabethan England. The result is that fresco of man and his demons – political, social, religious or sexual – which dazzles us because of its variety and subtlety, while enlightening us more than an army of psychologists, anthropologists and sociologists on the vertiginous complexity of human nature. In the Shakespearean character, for the first time, flowered that man in whom, as Georges Bataille wrote, 'contradictions sink their roots and empathise'.

As in literature, so in almost all fields of human affairs, freedom awakens in an unforeseen way, by accident or through the negligence of the dominant culture, which fails to legislate or organise certain areas of activity. Thanks to this exceptional privilege, individual initiative has ample scope for expressing itself. The result is always, sooner or later, creative impetus, winds of change brought

about by that activity which, due to chance or to prejudices or the distractions of those who exercise power, is let loose, develops very quickly and begins to transform its surroundings. That does not mean, of course, that once political, moral or religious censorship vanishes, genius immediately flourishes. It only means that when freedom does not exist or is faint, human creativity shrinks and literature and art become poor.

Why was colonial literature in Latin America so clamorously mediocre that today we have to search very hard to find an author in those 300 years who deserves to be read? For one Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz or an Inca Garcilaso de la Vega, how many hundreds of indistinguishable poets and writers, abstruse chroniclers, incontinent dramatists without a single original idea!

This literary scarcity is not gratuitous nor can it be attributed to an intellectual deficiency common to our colonial versifiers. The compressing steamroller of ecclesiastic censorship prohibited and condemned the novel as impious. This was a unique case in history of prohibition in the abstract of a literary form. Every printed work was the victim of an obsessive scrutiny for signs of heterodoxy, and the literary occupation became a depersonalised and aseptic ritual in which spontaneity had been suppressed once and for all. This servitude left the creator no alternative but to direct his imagination towards formal ostentation. As personal thinking was risky, even suicidal, the writer had to comply in the world of ideas with all the topics and stereotypes of dogma and to pour his creative drive into what was decorative and external. This explains the formal extravagances, often remarkable, of this conformist and predictable art.

Literature and Progress

Freedom of creation does not guarantee genius: it is merely the propitious ground in which it can germinate. On the other hand, when freedom does not exist, it is unlikely that germination will take place, because in artistic creation the entire personality must intervene: consciousness and unconsciousness, rational light and irrational tumult, searching for the unknown. Only the artistic work that is born from human totality, and which implies moral audacity as well as skill, transcends time and place. This rarely happens in repressive cultures, be they religious or ideological, in which, due to censorship or self-censorship, the creator must exert a systematic rational vigilance over what he writes so as not to transgress the limits of tolerance.

Now, the fact that freedom has been the motor of social and material as well as intellectual progress must not make us forget the weight of misfortunes that it has also imposed on man. Liberty meant, if not the abolition of injustice and political abuse, at least their radical reduction and the awareness of the need to fight them; but we must bear in mind the high cost we have to pay in order to preserve it. For in no other area as in that of liberty is the essential complexity of human actions so flagrant. Never wholly positive or negative – good or bad – but relatively one or the other, in doses often very difficult to weigh.

In the economic field, the same liberty that has impelled progress is also the source of inequalities and can open up huge chasms between those who have a lot and those who have little or nothing. The curiosity and inventiveness which it fuels has allowed man to tame illness, explore the abysses of the sea, of matter and the body, and, transgressing the law of gravity, to sail the skies. But it has also allowed him to devise weapons that make any modern state a potential trigger of the kind of devastations and holocaust that make the efforts of Nero, Ghenghis Khan or Tamberlane seem like playground amusements.

This sombre paradox should make us consider the different ways in which science and literature have evolved. It is only in the former that the notion of 'progress' has a distinct and chronological sense: the progressive discovery of knowledge which made previous discoveries obsolete and which brought better living conditions for man and increased his domination of nature. The advance of science, however, while it was pushing away illness, ignorance and scarcity, accentuated the vulnerability of existence through the perfection of weaponry.

There is a law here which admits of no exceptions. Each period of scientific apogee has been preceded by the development of military technology and has seen wars in which the slaughter also progressed in terms of the number of victims and in the efficiency of destruction. From the skull smashed by the primitive anthropoid to the annihilation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki there is a long history in which scientific development seems unable to achieve an equivalent progress in moral behaviour. Civilisation appears as a bicephalous animal. One of the heads stretches out to the sky: idealistic, generous, the eyes fixed on a pacific goal, a healthier, happier and more compassionate life. The other head, skimming the ground, keeps mulling over its old projects of power at any price, including that of the most atrocious destruction. In the nuclear era this process has reached its limit. At the same time as creating the more elaborate forms of well-being, science has infested the planet with devices capable of returning the globe to its

primeval condition of a dead star spinning cacophonously in the astral darkness.

Every notion of 'progress' is questionable in literature. The *Divine Comedy* may be better or worse then the *Odyssey*, and a reader may prefer Joyce's *Ulysses* to *Don Quixote*. But no great literary work erases or impoverishes one which appeared ten centuries ago. That, though, is exactly what happens in the field of science, where chemistry abolished alchemy (or turned it into literature). The spirit of destruction, seemingly inherent in the creative ability of human beings, is not absent in literature. On the contrary, physical and moral violence is a permanent presence in poems, plays and novels of all ages. The blood and corpses of the victims in literature are maybe as numerous as the ones which would result in normal life from a nuclear apocalypse. There is a difference, of course. If there is a nuclear war the human game as we know it is over. On the other hand, all the literary devastations and bloody orgies have produced only spasms, thrills and a few orgasms among readers.

What I am trying to say is that as there is no way of eradicating man's destructive drive, which is the price he pays for the faculty of invention, my conviction is that we should try to direct it towards books instead of gadgets. Literature can mitigate this drive without much risk. We should maybe reconsider the impulse that turned science into the exclusive tool of progress, relegating poetry, stories, drama and the novel to the secondary role of mere entertainment. Literature is also this, of course: a beautiful spell which provides us with some of that nourishment our desires long for in vain because we are condemned to want more than we have. But literature is more than this. It is a reality where man can happily empty the obscure recesses of his spirit, giving free rein to his worst appetites, dreams and obsessions, to those demons that go hand in hand with the angels inside him, and which, if they were ever materialised, would make life impossible. In the ambiguous mist of literature, the spirit of destruction can operate with impunity, enter into any orbit it chooses, and at the same time it can be innocuous and even benign, thanks to the cathartic effect that meeting with his private demons has on a reader. By contrast with scientific civilisation, through which we have become more fragile than our ancestors were before they discovered fire and learned to fight the tiger, under the aegis of literary civilisation more impractical, passive and visionary men would be born. But they would certainly be less dangerous to their fellow men than we have grown to be since we cast our vote for gadgetery and against the book.