

# The role of autobiography, biography, and history in the works of Mario Vargas Llosa. On the Nobel Prize in Literature awarded to Mario Vargas Llosa\*

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**Resum.** Aquesta vegada el Premi Nobel de Literatura ha estat concedit a un autor que els lectors de llengua castellana coneixen molt bé. D'una manera significativa, la carrera d'aquest escriptor està lligada a la ciutat de Barcelona des de ben aviat. Nascut al Perú (Arequipa, 1936), universitari a San Marcos de Lima i professor en aquesta mateixa universitat durant un curt temps, obtingué aviat una beca que li permeté traslladar-se a Espanya per fer una tesi doctoral i s'instal·là a Madrid. Ja l'any 1959 rebé el Premi Leopoldo Alas, per a contes, a Barcelona, per *Los jefes*; i, pocs anys després, guanyà el Premi Biblioteca Breve 1962 amb *La ciudad y los perros*. Aquesta novel·la és considerada per una part de la crítica com el començament del boom que aplegà els autors de la seva generació i d'altres anteriors. Barcelona es convertí, aleshores, en el centre de la nova literatura iberoamericana, ja que aquí s'hi trobaren, també, García Márquez, Donoso i d'altres. Els nuclis d'atenció foren l'editorial Seix Barral (i Carlos Barral en primer terme) i l'agent literària de tots ells, Carmen Balcells. Però el desenvolupament de l'obra de Mario Vargas Llosa neix des d'un realisme autobiogràfic, la denúncia de les dictadures, agafant com a exemples *Conversación en la Catedral*, la del general peruà Manuel Odría o la més tardana a *La fiesta del chivo* (2000), sobre Torrijos. Escriptor molt prolífic, no ha abandonat mai el sentit propi del realisme, encara que hagi situat les seves novel·les en ambients tan diversos com la ciutat, la selva amazònica, el Brasil o el París del segle XIX, o l'Àfrica. En un moment concret va defensar la novel·la *Tirant lo Blanc*, de Joanot Martorell, com a model. Ha cultivat la crítica literària amb llibres esplèndids sobre García Márquez, Flaubert, Víctor Hugo i Onetti, entre d'altres; i el periodisme, l'autobiografia i la política activa, quan es va presentar a les eleccions per a la presidència del seu país. És un escriptor d'idees i la seva dedicació literària ha estat constant.

**Paraules clau:** realisme autobiogràfic · estructures de poder · formalisme · surrealisme · objectivisme · perspectivisme · llenguatge oral · dictadures llatinoamericanes · periodisme

**Summary.** On this occasion the Nobel Prize for Literature was awarded to an author that Spanish readers know very well. This author's career has been significantly linked to the city of Barcelona since its early stages. Born in Peru (Arequipa, 1936), he was both student and worked as an instructor for a short time at San Marcos University in Lima, but soon won a scholarship that allowed him to move to Madrid to write his doctoral thesis. As early as 1953 he received the Leopoldo Alas Prize for stories, in Barcelona, for *Los jefes*, and a few years later he won the Biblioteca Breve Prize in 1962 for *La ciudad y los perros*. This novel is considered by some critics as the launch of the 'boom' that brought together the authors of his generation and others before. Barcelona became, then, the center of the new Latin American literature, with the presence of García Márquez, Donoso, and Vargas Llosa himself. The centers of attention were the publisher Seix Barral (with Carlos Barral at the front) and his literary agent, Carmen Balcells. But Vargas Llosa's literary development was born from an autobiographical realism, the condemnation of dictatorships, as in *Conversación en la Catedral*, which takes place during the dictatorship of Peruvian General Manuel Odría, or *La fiesta del chivo* (about Torrijos). A prolific writer, he never abandoned a sense of realism, even if his novels were set in places as diverse as the city, the Amazon rainforest, Brazil, Paris in the nineteenth century, or Africa. At a given time, he defended Joanot Martorell's novel *Tirant lo Blanc*, as a model. He has cultivated literary criticism with splendid books on García Márquez, Flaubert, Víctor Hugo and Oneto, among others; and journalism, autobiography and active politics such as when he ran for president in his country. He is a writer of ideas and his dedication to literature has been relentless.

**Keywords:** autobiographical realism · power structures · formalism · surrealism · objectivism · perspectivism · oral language · Latin American dictatorships · journalism

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In March 1993, Mario Vargas Llosa published *El pez en el agua. Memorias* (*A Fish in the Water: A Memoir*) at Seix Barral publishing house. In it, he alternates selected memories from his life with a justification of his candidacy for President of the Republic of Peru by spearheading a center-right coalition, which was eventually defeated in the second round by Alberto Fujimori, today in prison. However, the book also provides several keys to understanding his work, his personality, and his concept of literature (Fig. 1). It is telling that the book begins with his discovery, at the age of 11, just after fifth grade, of the existence of his father; he had believed his father to be dead, and now his mother had told him otherwise. Vargas Llosa spent his childhood in Cochabamba (Bolivia), and later in Lima and Piura with his grandparents. He describes this discovery as “a melodramatic, brutal, and vulgar story.” After that revelation, he began to write about his mother’s difficult marriage, the role of his grandparents, his aunts, and his uncle, and his re-encounter with a father figure, who did not come off in a very positive light. Yet his earliest stories are inspired by his childhood and adolescence. Perhaps his nomadic sense of life also comes from his itinerant life in different cities. However, the settings in his early novels are usually in Peru. What is more, they are drawn from the small circle of friends from his childhood and adolescence, when he attended school in the Miraflores neighborhood of Lima, although they were written during his years in purposeful exile, first in Paris and later in Barcelona, where he often says he spent the happiest years of his life. After that, he returned to Paris and then traveled to London, to universities in the United States, and to other more problematic areas on the planet: Gaza, Afghanistan, Iraq, Israel, Congo, and almost all the countries in South America and the world. He considers himself cosmopolitan. Fujimori tried to strip him of his Peruvian citizenship, which would have rendered him stateless, although he also obtained Spanish citizenship around that time (1992). He has apartments in Madrid, London, and elsewhere, and is a member of the *Real Academia Española* (Royal Spanish Academy).



**Fig. 1.** Mario Vargas Llosa. © The Nobel Foundation. Photo: Ulla Montan.

Nonetheless, the first part of his oeuvre never departs from the middle-class Peruvian settings in which he was raised. In 1958, he won a trip to France with one of his stories, *El desafío* (*The Challenge*), which had been awarded a prize from the magazine *Revue Française*. Shortly thereafter, he applied for a scholarship to write his thesis at the University of Madrid, having already earned his Bachelor’s from San Marcos University

in Lima, where he also briefly worked as an instructor. At that time, he was interested in the prose works of the modernist José Santos Chocano. While at the University of Madrid, he came into contact with Dámaso Alonso and Alonso Zamora Vicente. Those were the days of stylistics. His dissertation was not submitted until 1971; it would serve as the core of his later book on the works of Gabriel García Márquez. His first book of short stories, *Los jefes* (*The Cubs and Other Stories*), was awarded the then-prestigious, though not international, Leopoldo Alas Prize, in Barcelona. In 1959, relying on a scholarship, he once again traveled to Paris, where he earned a meager living as a journalist for the French national radio and television stations. Thus began his first exile, which was punctuated with brief trips to Peru. *La ciudad y los perros* (*The Time of the Hero*), which won the 1962 Biblioteca Breve Prize and the Critics’ Award in 1963, was the book that catapulted him to fame as a writer, not only in Spanish-speaking countries but all over the world through countless translations.

Some critics have deemed that it was *The Time of the Hero* that launched the boom (the term is nonetheless a journalistic trope, more related to the world of publishing than to that of literature) in Latin America literature, although it is more accurate to say that it was due to the core of authors who briefly lived together in Mexico City: Carlos Fuentes, José Donoso, Gabriel García Márquez, and Vargas Llosa himself. However, the soul behind the recovery and expansion of Latin America literature in Europe at that time was Carlos Barral, whom Vargas Llosa mentioned when he accepted the Nobel Prize, along with his literary agent Carmen Balcells. *The Time of the Hero* is inspired by the years when Vargas Llosa was a student at the Leoncio Prado Military Academy, at his father’s behest. Perhaps for this reason, his friends had nicknamed him ‘the cadet.’ In 1967, Barral wrote in the introduction to *Los cachorros* (*The Cubs*), which Esther Tusquets published in Barcelona at her publishing house, Lumen: “Vargas, says of one of our mutual friends, *c’est une bête à écrire*. I, however, believe that he is a writer driven by a kind of vocation that is rare to find in our days ( ). When I wanted to meet him he was just a name to me, the name at the top of a manuscript, submitted to the Biblioteca Breve Prize, that was one of the best and most stimulating surprises in my career as a publisher.” In those days, Vargas Llosa was living in Paris, like Julio Cortázar, on Rue de Tournon behind the Luxembourg Gardens, and what Barral remembered was the typewriter that presided over the tiny apartment: a powerful symbol. There is no doubt that among the figures from that boom, which would gradually expand, Vargas Llosa was the best educated as well as the most productive- *La casa verde* (*The Green House*) was published in 1966 and once again won the Critics’ Award in Spain in addition to the Rómulo Gallegos Prize in Venezuela. In Caracas, where he went to receive his prize, he met Gabriel García Márquez, when both were already famous. They belonged to a group of writers of varying ages whose aim was to shake up the method by which the schemes and forms of novels were organized. Drawing from the stories by America’s ‘lost generation,’ they believed that they had to break down traditional mechanisms, albeit without fleeing from a realism that they viewed as fundamental.

And even though they wrote about their own countries, together they ushered in a new awareness of being Latin Americans. They practiced a view of 'formalism' and assimilated the mechanisms of surrealism and the contributions from European literature, just as the generation before them had done. One of Vargas Llosa's basic ingredients was capturing the oral language and even the language of certain generational groups, like that of his Peruvian adolescence in *The Time of the Hero*. This is wielded even more boldly in 'The Cubs,' singular proof of his use of the narrative tense, through an individual and yet simultaneously collective narrator. In an early scene, the main character is incapable of overcoming the effects of the 'machismo' around him and his disgrace after a transcendental accident that pits him against the clique at school. The story stemmed from a brief news item Vargas Llosa had read in the newspapers. However, *The Time of the Hero* is still the outcome of the world of Lima's Miraflores neighborhood, an upper middle-class enclave before its decline, and the awakening of the instincts of adolescents with the ethics and militarism of the previous generations. He includes in the novel the figure of the surrealist poet César Moro, a teacher at the school at that time, under a pseudonym. The world described is the result of the social hierarchies established by the characters themselves, who are also its victims: 'bosses, dogs, and slaves.' Inspired by the Sartrean sense of commitment, Vargas Llosa tries to offer the model of a complex society, like Peru's, divided into classes and racial origins: the students who come from the mountains (the Sierra) versus those who come from a new urban middle class. As expected, the novel was not kindly viewed by Franco's censors, and so when Barral published it with a few compulsory corrections he enlisted the tolerated prestige of José M. Valverde, a member of the jury, who wrote a prologue that played down the story's situations: "Its essential motif is a criticism of mankind, individual by individual." However, the students and teachers at the Leoncio Prado Military Academy purchased 1000 books and made a symbolic bonfire with them in the middle of the schoolyard. But the novel was not so much a criticism of the military school as it was the suggestion of deliberate moral ambiguity, with an undeniable glimpse of the role of evil underlying it all, as Vargas Llosa noted in the Prologue (1972) to Georges Bataille's *La tragedia de Gilles de Rais* (*The Trial of Gilles de Rais*): "Thus, the heart of literary creation is an act of rebellion, a desire to bring the hidden side of life to the fore: Evil (the irrational, the instinctual, the gratuitous, the luxurious, the mortal)." We shall see that in all the different stages of his work Vargas Llosa never abandons this principle. Art never ceases to be viewed as a palliative to ease the unhappiness of life.

The author fled from his family milieu, which was not bereft of scandal, at the age of 20 with his 31-year-old divorced aunt, Julia Urquidi. They embarked on a somewhat bohemian trip to Paris, an autobiographical subject which, once novelized, would figure in the plot of *La tía Julia y el escribidor* (1977) (*Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter*). Years later, this book would receive a reply by his aunt herself: *Lo que Varguitas no dijo* (*What Little Vargas Didn't Say*, 1983). Later he would marry his first cousin, Patricia; they have been married for 45 years and have three

children, one of whom, Morgana, was born in Barcelona. The subject of the 'scriptwriter,' that is, the popular writer by trade who can just as easily pen a radio show as practice journalism, was always disturbing to him, perhaps because of the devoted audience that this kind of author achieves. Attracted by the theme, years later he did not hesitate to reflect on the popular novels by Corín Tellado, which had crossed borders and were fairly well-known around Latin America. Although Vargas Llosa sometimes defines himself somewhat ironically as an *escribidor*, his work bears little resemblance to the job of such writers, although as a critic he is interested in genre literature and in Rulfo, Carpentier, and Flaubert, with the two sides representing the antipodes of any populism.

While the specific inspiration in *The Cubs* came from a newspaper item, *The Green House* (1966, Rómulo Gallegos International Prize) should be understood as a technical *tour de force*. Just a few years later, the novelist himself offered us the story behind this novel and its sense of adventure, in *Historia secreta de una novela* (*The Secret History of a Novel*, 1971). However, unlike the previous books, in this case the scenes are set inland, in Piura, where he had lived as a child, in the middle of the desert, and in the jungle, in Amazonia, which he had visited twice. Initially conceived as a short story, *The Green House* grew to 4000 pages. It is an experience lived and heard but transferred to the imagination. In that novel, he abandons the city—and thus the writers from the boom who are identified with the urban novel—for the jungle. It is at *The Green House*, the name of a real brothel in Piura, that we first meet *La Chunga*, in a kind of split of two houses, one the outcome of the other. *The Unconquerables* also appear, four characters from La Mangachería, a criminal neighborhood, one of whom, Litu-ma, we shall revisit later. The book consists of five intersecting stories, yet the reader never gets lost. In his memoirs, Vargas Llosa recalls the real 'green house' as "a large hut, somewhat more rustic than a house, a much livelier and more sociable place than the brothels of Lima, which were usually sordid and often quarrelsome ( ) My generation experienced the swan song of the bordello; it laid to rest this institution which would gradually become extinct as sexual customs relaxed, the pill was discovered, the myth of virginity became obsolete, and boys began to make love with their girlfriends." In an interview, he described the adolescent experience of the mysterious and prohibited cave. However, the other landscape in the novel is Santa María de Nieva, in the jungle, a place he would also write about later in *Pantaleón y las visitadoras* (*Captain Pantoja and the Special Service*, 1973) and in *El hablador* (*The Storyteller*, 1987). The jungle-dwellers had been the subject of the trend called the 'indigenous novel' in Ecuador, which José M. Arguedas had already honed, although *The Storyteller* was more closely related to the strange and little-known novel by Rómulo Gallegos, *Canaima* (1935), first published in Barcelona. The purpose of *The Green House* was to combine the techniques of objectivism, still fashionable in French novel writing, with perspectivism and inner monologue. It is perhaps the author's most complex novel, as well as his most ambitious in terms of the number and complexity of characters and the multiplicity of settings. The army also plays a role in the story, although quite

different from the humorous one in *Captain Pantoja and the Special Service*, in which a young officer's efficacy at organizing a sex service for his soldiers, isolated in the jungle—derived from the unforgettable and disciplined Lieutenant Gamboa in *The Time of the Hero*—exceeds his superiors' expectations. The key to the humor, more akin to Cervantes and the classic English novel, comes from a new view of reality. It reveals the author's distancing from that partly autobiographic and direct realism of his early years.

*Conversación en la Catedral* (*Conversation in the Cathedral*, 1969), however, still bears traces from his early period, in which his Peruvian years provide the fodder. In that work, we find his views, based on his own experiences, on dictatorial power, this time in reference to General Manuel A. Odría, who governed Peru with an iron fist from 1948 until 1956. *La Catedral* (The Cathedral), another irony, is the name of a working-class bar that Vargas Llosa frequented when he was a student. It is where he met Zavalita, a minor journalist and the chauffeur disparaged by Don Cayo, a character close to the dictator. Here we can detect an attempt to describe the different circles of Peruvian society and at the same time the world of the journalist from *La Crónica*, as the author himself was in his early days, hence his familiarity with the atmosphere of the newsrooms at newspapers from that time. As such, it is still one of his works with autobiographical inspiration, yet he also draws from the circular choral technique, similar to Dos Passos' intentions, to capture the multiple voices of a capital city like Lima, with all its contradictions, as well as the voices of an entire country. It is an allegorical, historical novel, although the author recognizes the natural infidelities. And yet it is also a harrowing political novel and thus not a far cry from other authors' attempts to craft a novel of the Latin American dictatorships. The circumstances were described by Vargas Llosa himself: "That climate of cynicism, apathy, resignation, and moral decrepitude of Peru during the eight-year reign of Odría was the raw material for this novel [ ] I began to write it in Paris ten years after the dictatorship as I was reading Tolstoy, Balzac, and Flaubert and earning a living as a journalist, and I continued it in Lima, in the snows of Pullman (Washington), in a small, crescent-shaped street in Valle del Canguro, and in London—between literature classes at Queen Mary's College—and I ended it in Puerto Rico in 1969, after rewriting it several times over. No other novel has given me as much work, so if I had to rescue just one of the books I've written from a fire, I would rescue this one" (June 1998). That was when Carmen Balcells went to see him in London and suggested that he stop teaching classes and instead devote himself solely to literature. She herself would send him a salary equivalent to what he earned as a teacher in England. Vargas Llosa accepted and the money became his primary source of income, although the author has never quite managed to fully leave university teaching. In fact, he was teaching at an American university when he received the Nobel Prize.

In *La palabra mágica* (*The Magic Word*), published in Mexico in 1983 and in Spain in 1996, the Guatemalan writer Augusto Monterroso wrote: "In the early months of 1968 Mario Vargas Llosa wrote me a letter from London. [...] In his letter, which reflected the contagious enthusiasm of those far-off times, the

recent author of *The Time of the Hero* asked me to participate in what would no doubt be an interesting project: a book of stories about Latin American dictators. And that book would contain the following authors: Alejo Carpentier (who would cover the Cuban dictator Gerardo Machado), Carlos Fuentes (the Mexican dictator Antonio López de Santa Anna), José Donoso (the Bolivian dictator Mariano Melgarejo), Julio Cortázar (the Argentine dictator Juan Domingo Perón), Carlos Martínez Moreno (the Argentine dictator Juan Manuel de Rosas), Augusto Roa Bastos (the Paraguayan dictator José Gaspar Rodríguez de Francia), Mario Vargas Llosa (the Peruvian dictator Luis Miguel Sánchez Cerro) and finally Augusto Monterroso, that is, myself, to cover the Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza senior, the greatest thing in his life being when the President of the United States, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, honored him by saying he was a son of a bitch, but at least he was their son of a bitch" (p. 53). The project was aborted, but some of those authors still wrote their novels (and a few stories) about the dictatorships, among them Vargas Llosa himself with his perpetual interest in the mechanisms of political and absolute power.

Missing from this list are two seminal figures: Gabriel García Márquez, who after *Cien años de soledad* (*One Hundred Years of Solitude*) wrote another great novel, *El otoño del patriarca* (*The Autumn of the Patriarch*, 1972), which is an amalgam of all the Latin American dictators as well as General Franco, because he partly wrote it when he was living in Barcelona, and Augusto Roa Bastos' *Yo, el Supremo* (*I, the Supreme*). The outcome of the friendship with García Márquez was Vargas Llosa's watershed book, from a critical standpoint, on the Columbian writer's oeuvre: *García Márquez: historia de un deicidio* (*García Márquez: Story of a Deicide*, 1971, published by Barral Editores in Barcelona), which has still not been surpassed and which after the public rupture of the friendship between the two writers in Mexico has never been reissued except in volume VI of his *Obras Completas* (*Complete Works*, Galaxia Gutenberg), for which I wrote the Prologue. There we can witness Vargas Llosa's attempts to discover a suitable critical method for examining the works of his then-friend. Both novelists partook in Barcelona's shining hour, the 'gauche divine,' which featured a regular hedonistic social gathering of professionals and writers at a venue called 'Boccaccio' and which also included many of the Latin Americans temporarily living in Barcelona. They became involved in anti-Franco politics, while from the Latin American vantage point this period was marked by the Cuban Revolution. The group would eventually rupture over the 'Padilla' affair, in 1971. Herbert Padilla was a Cuban poet who was arrested after receiving the Casa de Las Américas Poetry Prize and, in Soviet style, 'confessed' while also denouncing many other writers, who were accused by the Castro regime of being CIA agents or homosexuals. The response came immediately in the guise of protests by several prominent European and Latin America authors, with Vargas Llosa as one of the instigators of a document addressed to Fidel Castro. This affair drove a wedge into what was called the boom, which despite being a phenomenon encouraged by the Barcelona publishing houses entailed certain bonds forged by friendships and literary affinities.

In 1953, Mario Vargas Llosa read Joanot Martorell's *Tirant lo Blanc* in the library of the University of San Marcos. He set great store by this text, not only because Cervantes saved it from the bonfire in *Don Quijote* but because he could harness its realism, eroticism, and unbridled imagination as a justification of his own aesthetic: the project of a 'total novel.' He described Martorell as "the first in this line of substitutes for God," and he regarded *Tirant lo Blanc* as superior to Cervantes' novel. At that time, it was a forgotten classic just being revived by scholars like Martí de Riquer. However, Vargas Llosa was the one who rescued it for the public at large by asking Carlos Barral to reissue it. The publisher did so in a new pocket-sized paperback edition, also by Riquer, with Vargas Llosa writing a prologue for the book as well as an essay in *Revista de Occidente* in January of 1969, which also contained Andrés Amorós's review of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. He compared the book to the work of Flaubert and mentioned it in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech in Stockholm.

The new Latin American writers needed a tradition. It could not be national (as it was in the case of Arguedas). García Márquez, for example, adopted Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year*. Thus, just like the modernists, and not only the poets, Latin American writers drifted away from the Spanish realist tradition and instead proclaimed the empire of the imagination. Vargas Llosa and García Márquez lived in Barcelona at the same time (1970-1974). Their foray abroad had a great deal to do with the figure of Juan Goytisolo, then in Paris with the Gallimard publishing house, and with the liberal atmosphere of Barcelona, which sought to escape from the burdensome late years of the Franco dictatorship. Vargas Llosa has described that climate many times: "At that time everyone believed that culture would play a crucial role in the future democracy. Afterwards, it was all for naught. Barcelona was the cultural capital of Spain, and then this idiocy of nationalism put an end to it all." The author has often declared himself to be stateless, cosmopolitan, alien to any nationalism. However, much of his oeuvre stems from his experiences in Peru, which he has never given up, and from his language (at times Peruvian Spanish is apparent in the dialogues). In running for the presidency, he was even prepared to sacrifice his literary career to save Peru.

His admiration for Flaubert led Vargas Llosa to write a seminal book inspired by his correspondence: *La orgía perpetua: Flaubert y Madame Bovary* (*The Perpetual Orgy: Flaubert and Madame Bovary*, 1975), which was published by the Madrid-based publisher Taurus and can be interpreted as a reply to Jean-Paul Sartre's unfinished study of one of the masters of realism. We have already mentioned Vargas Llosa's ongoing admiration of Sartre, even though his political positions were ultimately far from those of the French philosopher.

In 1981, *La guerra del fin del mundo* (*The War of the End of the World*), one of Vargas Llosa's most accomplished books, was published. In that work, the author shifted his usual landscape to draw inspiration from a forgotten Brazilian literature classic, *Os Sertões* (1902) by Euclides da Cunha. The model was historical and unquestionably that of Tolstoy and his *War and Peace*. Vargas Llosa's ambition is colossal, and the result

is outstanding. The action takes place in the Brazil of the 'sertões,' in Canudos (state of Bahia) in the late 19th century. The main character, Antonio Vicente Mendes Maciel, 'O Conseqeiri-ro,' heralds the birth of a religious, anarchic movement that gradually spreads and is viewed as a national political danger. The descriptions of the godforsaken people, mass organization, and the repressive function of the army shaped a remarkable literary portrait. This is unquestionably one of the author's best stories, but one that is related to history. However, in 1987, he returned to the jungles of Peru, this time to confront the primitive world and the main character's adaptation to the most traditional world, the hidden tribes. *The Storyteller*, mentioned above, is a character that orally transmits the history of the tribe and is capable of abandoning civilization for a primitivism that is, nonetheless, idealized. This is close to folklore (calling Lévi-Strauss to mind) and far from indigenism, the marginal outcome of the 1920s socialist realism. The author who had broken with that vein was José María Arguedas, about whom Vargas Llosa wrote in a study entitled *La utopía arcaica. José María Arguedas y las ficciones del indigenismo* (*The Archaic Utopia: José María Arguedas and the Fictions of Indigenism*, 1996). Vargas Llosa had been interested in Arguedas since 1955 and had met him in Paris. Arguedas knew Quechua and was always one of Vargas Llosa's references.

Vargas Llosa's output has continued. His working method is that of an indefatigable creator, yet he has never abandoned journalism, which keeps him up to date. He writes every day, still by hand, teaches classes, and travels widely in order to keep abreast of the world and to immerse himself in what will become the settings in his novels. He takes copious notes, just like the 19th century narrators, and carries out extensive library research. In fact, he reads and writes in the British Museum library. He says that he does not work well in Lima, where everyone knows him and he can barely leave his home. Nor can he work in Madrid. That is why he chose London, even though his nomadic spirit leads him from one place to another, and as a subject of great media interest he knows that he is never able to stray too far. Patricia, his wife, whom he referred to in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, and their son Álvaro, who works in the world of journalism and television, often operate as a filter in order to provide him with the time he needs to continue his writing.

*Historia de Mayta* (*The Real Life of Alejandro Mayta*), published in 1984, can be viewed as an analysis of the endogenous violence in Peru. Twenty-five years after the deeds, a journalist examines the life of Alejandro Mayta, a Peruvian Trotskyist who led an attempted revolution in 1958. The result of historical inquiry is once again disillusion. *The Real Life of Alejandro Mayta* must be compared to *Lituma en los Andes* (*Lituma in the Andes*, 1994)—about a person whom we met in *The Green House*. The book, awarded the Planeta Prize, was inspired by the also failed terrorist and guerrilla movement *Sendero Luminoso* (Shining Path). Once again we see how the author draws inspiration from historical situations related to his life, even though the latter novel, which is less structurally ambitious, is not one of his most accomplished.

With his interest in the different genres of the popular novel,

Vargas Llosa attempts an erotic story in *Elogio de la madrastra* (*In Praise of the Stepmother*, 1988), which won him the 'La Sonrisa Vertical Prize', sponsored by the Barcelona publishing house Tusquets. The relatively short novel, compared to the author's tendency to write long or drawn-out texts, was dedicated to Luis García Berlanga. Its main character is an angelic boy who ends up seducing his stepmother, writes about the episode, and destroys his father's marriage, all of this accompanied by references to a few classical myths reflected in paintings and now narrated spiritedly. The crucial male figure in that story reappears in *Los cuadernos de don Rigoberto* (*The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto*, 1997), in which Vargas Llosa revisited the erotic, humorous vein. His interest in the serial novel can be seen in the study *La tentación de lo imposible. Víctor Hugo y 'Los Miserables'* (*The Temptation of the Impossible: Victor Hugo and Les Misérables*, 2004). The author had confessed that he had read *Les Misérables* back in his days as a student at the Leoncio Prado Military Academy: "He was the best friend I had there."

Nor did he flee from the method that had proven so useful to him. In his study *El viaje a la ficción. El mundo de Juan Carlos Onetti* (*The Journey to Fiction: The World of Juan Carlos Onetti*, 2008), the outcome of a course that he taught at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., he appreciated the 'crapulous style' of the most pessimistic contemporary Latin American authors and the adventure of discovering their dark side, evil, which is always more interesting in the literary world than the normality of a life without contrasts. In *Cartas a un joven novelista* (*Letters to a Young Novelist*, 1997), he summarized his concept of the novel and how it should be constructed, using the right techniques and organization, from the vantage point of the critic-reader as well. After all, he has never eschewed a necessary narrative mechanism which, when not separated from the basis of reality, allows his novels to journey along new pathways, depending on the nature of the plot. Technique, however, is always placed at the service of the free morality available to a fiction writer in his work. No work, regardless of how transcendent it may be, should deviate from its initial commitment, apart from the political conceptions defined by a liberalism that is overwhelming in every respect.

In *¿Quién mató a Palomino Molero?* (*Who Killed Palomino Molero?*, 1986), he takes advantage of the police novel scheme to construct a model novella that operates almost like clockwork. Just as on other occasions, the book's subject comes from a somewhat trivial item published in a Peruvian newspaper, but Vargas Llosa used it to write a short and very meticulously constructed story inspired by the police story, as García Márquez had done in his *Crónica de una muerte anunciada* (*Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, 1981). Yet once again, in *La fiesta del Chivo* (*The Feast of the Goat*, 2000), one of his most noteworthy novels, the author engages in a reflection on corruption in dictatorships. Set in the Dominican Republic, it enabled him to describe the death of the dictator Leónidas Trujillo and to draw the portrait of a pure conspirator and his successor Joaquín Balaguer, who ruled over a falsified democracy. The book can also be viewed as a historical novel, the moral reflection of a declining power but also marked by deliberate eroticism, which is part of the decline itself: the dictator's col-

laborators and ministers have to lend him their own wives as proof of their loyalty—and this in a Latin American country characterized by its 'machismo.' It also includes torture, both physical and moral, and the suffering of an imaginary female figure who is important and complex though not historically based. Once again, the author draws from his own direct experience and from newspapers, and chronicles to portray the perversity of human beings, the seduction of power, and the annihilation of the individual.

More recently, the novelist has sought a historical basis to sustain fiction. He no longer draws inspiration from his early experiences; rather he needs to justify them by resorting to history, to documents, and to real personalities. For the reader, the novel once again becomes a kind of 'true story,' as it was in the early 19th century: a mixture of truth/reality and fiction. He also uses politics as a pretext for examining perversion and evil. However, the scenes and primitive society he present in *El Paraíso de la otra esquina* (*The Way to Paradise*, 2003) are even more exotic, inspired by the biography of the feminist Flora Tristán, in parallel with that of her grandson, the painter Paul Gauguin. The novel's organization, set in very different times, has a bit of Faulkner about it, even though Flora Tristán's life is much less attractive than the painter's, who was driven to wonder about the nature of his aesthetic—and is thus closer to the novelist himself—and about primitivism yet without discarding the erotic elements associated with utopia. Although it could be viewed as a novel from the now globalized world (Lima, Paris, Havana, Germany, Belgium, Tokyo, Madrid, Vienna, Athens, Glasgow, Rome, etc.), *Travesuras de la niña mala* (*The Bad Girl*, 2006) is a tribute to Paris, the trap of the capital of Latin American writers since the 19th century. The female character is a femme fatale, and the action spans a period of time from the 1950s until today. The story also includes certain historical events that enable the reader to align it with the passage of time in the outside world.

Even more exotic yet no less moral is *El sueño del celta* (*The Dream of the Celt*, 2010). Its publication, heralded far and wide, almost dovetailed with the author's Nobel Prize. Its main character is Roger Casement (1864-1916), who was sent to the Congo by King Leopold with the mission of "opening up the pathway of civilization through trade." However, what Casement observed in Africa was the most brutal exploitation of mankind by mankind, including children. This was also the key to Marx's oeuvre and as such the book marks a return to the beginning in a period of global crisis in the capitalist system as well as a direct attack on the concept of unbridled capitalism. Vargas Llosa uses the reports and newspapers that Casement himself sent to England and published. The envoy's next mission was in Peru, in the rubber fields. While the previous episode was reminiscent of Conrad, this one brings us back to the atmosphere of José Eustaquio Rivera's *La Vorágine* (*The Vortex*). However, the third part of the novel is no less dramatic, since it is written from prison, after the character has been sentenced to death. Roger Casement was Irish; driven by his idealism he defended Ireland's independence from Great Britain. *The Dream of the Celt*—the title comes from Casement's papers—is the latest in Vargas Llosa's literary oeuvre.

As the author proclaimed in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, his first vocation was the theater. As an adolescent, he wrote and put on a now lost play, *La huida del inca* (*The Flight of the Inca*), which was performed at the Teatro Variedades by students from San Miguel school in Piura, the city's first experiment with a coed school. His first mature play was *La señorita de Tacna* (*The Young Lady from Tacna*, 1981), followed by *Kathie y el hipopótamo* (*Kathie and the Hippopotamus*, 1983) and *La Chunga* (*The Jest*, 1986). Not too long ago Vargas Llosa even acted onstage with Aitana Sánchez Gijón, in a work directed by Joan Ollé. The subjects in his plays are not very different from those of his novels. In the words which serve as the prologue to the *The Jest*, he wrote: "Just like in my two previous plays [...], in *The Jest* I have tried to project the human totality of acts and dreams, of facts and fantasies, in a dramatic fiction." He has often appeared in the media, in an effort to avoid straying too far from current events and politics, which have always engrossed him. Apart from numerous interviews, selected journalistic articles written by Vargas Llosa have been compiled in several books that offer provocative thinking: *Contra viento y marea* (*Against Wind and Tide*, 3 vols., 1990), *Desafío a la libertad* (*Challenge to Freedom*, 1994), *El lenguaje de la pasión* (*The Language of Passion*, 2000). There are also compilations of literary essays such as *La verdad de las mentiras* (*The Truth about Lies*, 1990 and 2002), the title of his reception speech at the Real Academia Española. That publication brings together 36 analyses of 20th century narrators to demonstrate that "the handful of fictions in this book proves that, despite the pessimistic prophecies about the future of literature, those committing deicide still maraud the city confabulating stories to make up for the deficiencies of history." His optimism regarding the maintenance and efficacy of fiction is combined with accentuated pessimism regarding human nature. If one of the reasons wielded by the Nobel Prize jury for granting him the prize was his criticism of power, then the human genus, according to the author, can improve through reading, through the dissatisfaction that should be sparked by stories versus history, through the lives read about compared to one's own unsatisfied existence. In this sense, he has not strayed too far from the primitive existentialism of his youth, although he has replaced Camus with Sartre and autobiography with biography and history.

### To learn more

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