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Review Of "El Pez En El Agua" By M. V. Llosa

John J. Hassett

Swarthmore College, jhasset1@swarthmore.edu

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second than the third. The uncertain organizing logic also makes it difficult to discern the purpose of the anthology. Is it a scholarly reference or a text for graduate seminars or...? I finally decided that it was intended as a supplementary textbook for graduate students because the bibliography is an introductory, not a specialist's, list.

Whatever its intended use and despite its unevenness, the collection is handy to have on one's bookshelves, simply because of the range of topics collected in one package. Moreover, the essays offer abundant insights into a problematic but important writer; even specialists would benefit from reading the essays as a commentary on each other.

Bonnie Frederick
Washington State University

Mario Vargas Llosa. *El pez en el agua.* Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1993. 544p.

Given Mario Vargas Llosa's lifelong immersion in the world of books, often to escape the harsh reality that exists outside their pages, and his admitted revulsion to being controlled by others, one wonders how he could have entertained the idea of running for president of Peru. Perhaps his wife Patricia offers the best insight when she describes her husband's interest as just another attempt on his part to experience a new novelistic adventure. Whatever the reason, this book of memoirs will convince its readers not only of Vargas Llosa's intellectual honesty but also of his profound political naiveté.

El pez en el agua, however, is not limited to the details of Vargas Llosa's run for the presidency of Peru. The book is divided into two halves which produce an interesting counterpoint throughout the text. Curiously these memoirs begin not with the presidential campaign but with the abrupt reentry into Vargas Llosa's life of a father whom he had believed dead. These ten chapters, devoted to the writer's youth, his relationship with his estranged father Ernesto Vargas, his initial attempts at writing and his growing perception of literature as a subversive activity, take us up to the year 1958, and they are inter-

persed with ten chapters that deal almost exclusively with the writer's political candidacy in 1987, his electoral defeat in 1990 and his subsequent return to Europe. Many readers, particularly those drawn to the personal, literary aspects of the author's career, will no doubt find the former more interesting than their political counterparts. But whatever our preference, a common theme of betrayal persists throughout the entire book. Betrayal experienced on a very personal level when Mario's mother lets the man who had abandoned her and her unborn son back into their life, shattering the sheltered world that the boy had shared with his mother and her relatives in Piura. And betrayal, too, on a political level felt by the presidential candidate as he saw his political star soar into the heavens only to fall suddenly and embarrassingly to earth at the hands of a political unknown whose rise to power in Peru dumbfounded even the most cynical political experts.

Why this emphasis in the book upon the early years of his life and especially upon the menacing and authoritative figure of Ernesto Vargas, a man whom the young Vargas Llosa obviously despised as much as he feared? There is little doubt that the writer undertakes through these pages an exorcism of his past: one remote, one very recent, both equally traumatic. but he is also quick to point out that he recognizes in his father something typically Peruvian that informs his understanding of contemporary Peruvian society and, to a certain extent, his defeat as a presidential candidate. He states that his father embodies a deeply-rooted national disease that produces an insidious resentment towards one's fellow countryman and an inferiority complex with regard to one's social class and race:

...Porque Ernesto J. Vargas, pese a su blanca piel, sus ojos claros y su apuesta figur, pertenecía a una familia socialmente inferior a la de su mujer. Las aventuras de mi abuelo Marcelino habían ido empobreciendo y rebajando a la familia Vargas hasta el ambiguo margen

donde los burgueses empiezan a sentirse cholos, es decir, mestizos, es decir, pobres y despreciados.

...Siempre se es blanco o cholo de alguien, porque siempre se está mejor o peor situado que otros, o se es más o menos pobre o importante o de rasgos más o menos occidentales o mestizos o indios o africanos o asiáticos que otros, y toda esta selvática nomenclatura que decide buena parte de los destinos individuales se mantiene gracias a una efervescente construcción de prejuicios y sentimientos—desdén, desprecio, envidia, rencor, admiración, emulación que es, muchas veces, por debajo de las ideologías, valores y desvalores, la explicación profunda de los conflictos y frustraciones de la vida peruana. (11-12)

In 1987 Vargas Llosa did not wholeheartedly embrace running for political office, particularly given what he had learned about ideologies and the dreaded disease he saw reflected in Peru's landscape. Nor were these the most opportune times for a political neophyte to get his feet wet. More than 50% of the labor force was unemployed; inflation was running at a mind-boggling 7,000% per year; the country was in the grips of an unrelenting drought and foreign debt had risen to more than 40% of the GNP. To make matters worse, Sendero Luminoso's guerrilla war, once limited to the rural areas, had extended its control over several urban areas making the prospect of a successful centralized government extremely difficult. Vargas Llosa lays most of the blame for this state of affairs at the feet of Peru's populist tradition and corrupt populist leaders while he tends to gloss over the often insidious role plagued by conservative politicians in maintaining the status quo. There are times when the reader, particularly one with some knowledge of Latin America and its societies, cannot help but be struck by the depths of Vargas Llosa's political naiveté. A clear example of this

is innocently offered by the author as he describes a speech given by him to one of the country's most powerful labor organizations. In it he addresses the evils of job security and the inefficiencies it generates. Taking Taiwan, Hong Kong and Switzerland as examples of countries with flexible labor laws that have produced some of the strongest economies in the world, he hastens to assure Peruvian workers that his free market policies will affect only a tiny minority of them. Another glowing example of such political disingenuousness is his decision that as a political campaigner he could avoid all conflicts of interest and obligations to his political backers by simply instructing his advisers to keep the names of all financial contributors a secret from him.

At first glance, it may seem surprising that Vargas Llosa, despite such behavior, enjoyed a strong showing in the initial polls of the campaign. But in the early months of his candidacy there is little doubt that he represented for many Peruvians a possible break with the political past. APRA, led by Alan García, had played a large role in bringing the country to economic ruin and obviously a candidate from that party would not have had a ghost of a chance in the upcoming election. Moreover, the conservative right, identified principally with former president Belaúnde Terry, was totally alienated from the country's poor majority. As the campaign progressed, however, more and more Peruvians began to identify Vargas Llosa with the conservative, well-to-do, pro-business classes whom they detested. To some extent he and his advisers were to blame for this perception, since their party, Frente Democrático, was dominated by some of the country's most conservative elements.

Vargas Llosa's meteoric rise in the polls from a high of 47% in 1987 dwindled to just 27% by April 1990. Albert Fujimori, rector of Peru's Agrarian University, was close behind with 24.6% of the vote cast in the first round. In the second round, since no candidate had garnered the necessary 50% of the votes, Fujimori, the slightly built academic of

Japanese ancestry, was elected on June 10, 1990 with more than a twenty point advantage over Vargas Llosa.

While some might look upon Fujimori's victory as a political fluke, most serious analysts now view the Fujimori phenomenon in terms of the average Peruvian's long desired break with a political tradition dominated by white, well-to-do leaders of European ancestry. In the four years following his election Fujimori has brought inflation down to less than 100%; he has closed Congress, created his own hand-picked national Assembly and, like Chile's Pinochet in the seventies and eighties, he has turned the bashing of politicians into a national pastime. Ironically, the new government's success lies in its application of economic policies that are not very different from those espoused by Vargas Llosa and the Frente Democrático.

After his electoral loss Vargas Llosa returned immediately to Europe where he has since become a Spanish national. His assumption of Spanish citizenship provides only a partial explanation of why today an increasing number of Peruvians view him in such a negative light. The real culprit has been the publication of this book of memoirs, *El pez en el agua*, in which he sought to exorcise his disillusionment with the country's political process, the corruption of its leaders and what appears to him to be the facile manipulation of its people. Very few Peruvians escape the writer's wrath in these pages, including former supporters of his own political party. This autobiographical exercise, rather than providing the writer with greater insight into his own political naiveté and the forces at work among the less fortunate of his country, may have left him even more perplexed and with an even greater sense of betrayal. Such conclusions may indeed be warranted if we consider Vargas Llosa's recent demands that the U.S. impose an embargo on Peru similar to that imposed on Haiti because of Fujimori's decision to shut down Congress. It is an understatement to say that most Peruvians were outraged by such remarks since the great majority of them saw their president's

action as perfectly justified, given the chaos engulfing their society. And while Vargas Llosa puts thousand and thousands of miles between him and the land he so bitterly attacks, many tend to see this physical distance as one more indication of the author's aloofness, not to mention his estrangement from a society that perhaps he understands only superficially.

El pez en el agua, although not the great political novel everyone was expecting Vargas Llosa to write as a result of his brief affair with national politics, is, nevertheless, fascinating. Surely it will be read very differently by Peruvians than by the majority of its readers world-wide. But for both reading publics this book will be hard to put down, either because of the level at which it infuriates or because of the insights it offers regarding the personal and political psychology of one of Latin America's most controversial figures.

John J. Hassett
Swarthmore College

Mario Vargas Llosa. *Lituma en los Andes*. Barcelona: Editorial Planeta, 1993. 313p.

This is Vargas Llosa's first book of fiction since his unsuccessful campaign for the presidency of Peru (1987-1990). Readers, I think, will tend to find that as a novel *Lituma en los Andes* is somewhat uneven and disappointing, notwithstanding its being awarded the Premio Planeta for 1993. Similar to its predecessors, it is undeniably vargasllosian in its attempt to explore and understand the enigma that is today's Peru and the violence that has besieged it in recent years. But it is precisely this exploration and the conclusions suggested that render the novel unconvincing and lacking in the depth that we have come to expect, perhaps unfairly, from the author of such masterpieces as *La casa verde*, *Conversacion en la Catedral*, and *La guerra del fin del mundo*.

Readers of Vargas Llosa's fiction will immediately recognize in this novel's protagonist, Lituma, an old literary acquaintance who appeared in several of