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### A Storyteller: Mario Vargas Llosa Between Civilization And Barbarism

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# On Literature

The land of literature is a fairy land to those who view it at a distance, but, like all other landscapes, the charm fades on a nearer approach, and the thorns and briars become visible.

—W. Irving

## ART AND SOCIETY

The place that the offerings of the artistic vision occupy in the Western cultural tradition, particularly with regard to the conceptions of the Good Life, has always been at once vague and precarious. During the period of Athenian democracy the artistic vision flourished; but Plato banished artists from his Republic. During the Enlightenment, following Kant, Schiller held that the task of art is to educate humanity; but Hegel argued that art had been superseded by philosophy as the clearest statement about the designs of God in history. In the afterglow of the Enlightenment, art was seen as a handmaiden to politics—by the right and the left. Then, almost as a last gasp, artists and critics asserted art as self-sufficient: *l'art pour l'art*. The retreat into pure form was apparently unsuccessful. There are those today who claim that the aesthetic daemon, as God, is dead.<sup>1</sup>

Within this problematic position of art in Western culture, literature offers an even more precarious case. For centuries it trailed behind the other arts in being regarded as an adequate vehicle for offering enduring insights into the human condition, even among those willing and able to appreciate the artistic temperament. No doubt the suspicion endured largely because of literature's close proximity to the populace, the everyday, the temporal, and hence, the ephemeral.

Poetry gained reluctant acceptance as a proper vehicle to talk about the Good Life in large measure because it claimed to have overcome the weight of time and to have grasped veritable essences. The case for the novel—produced for mass consumption—as a proper form of artistic expression was still being assessed by the middle of this century.<sup>2</sup>

### ON THE PERIPHERY

It is self-evident that questions concerning the Good Life are, necessarily, ethical questions. Therefore, they must engage ongoing political and economic debates. Furthermore, given Europe's political and economic ascendancy in world history, particularly since the fifteenth century, it was inevitable that the controversies regarding artistic visions of the Good Life would ricochet, not only within but also beyond the European cultural borders. In effect, ever since then, an increasing sector of humanity—those inhabiting the so-called third-world countries—have been deeply affected by debates in which they did not participate. Once their traditional notions of Beauty or Truth had been undermined by an aggressive European animus, the discussions concerning the Good Life were carried out under the watchful eyes of colonial centers of power. As a consequence, the ethical dimensions of art dispersed as echoes of faraway realities. This was certainly true in the case of Latin America; at least until the middle of this century.

### VARGAS LLOSA: LITERATURE AS PROTEST

Within the Latin American tradition, conceived as an extension of the Western world, the Peruvian writer/critic Mario Vargas Llosa (1936– ) must be considered among those who have most vociferously argued for embracing literature in general and the novel in particular, as proper vehicles for saying something meaningful about the Good Life. What are Vargas Llosa's reasons for making the claim? Why should we accept his proposition?

From very early on, Vargas Llosa has conceived literature—the act of writing it and secondarily the act of reading it—as a form of protest. With nuanced extensions and restrictions, he has retained this initial appraisal. In a general sense, he posits, literature translates humanity's protest against the finitude, the boundedness, of its condition. It expresses a discontentment with our limitations as perceived against the free play of our imagination. Through the act of writing—and of reading—we make light of the heavy chains of the mundane. In other words, following in the footsteps of Georg Lukacs and Walter Benjamin, Vargas Llosa posits that literature always says “and yet” to life. In a more particular sense, Vargas Llosa holds that literature is also a protest against the concrete evils of the writer's reality. These concrete evils provide the occasion for the creative act;

they are the necessary instantiations of a general condition. Without a protesting animus, both against life itself and against its evil instantiations, the literary act is impossible.<sup>3</sup>

In protesting against the limits of the human condition, holds Vargas Llosa, literature expands our horizons. In its innermost core, the literary vision strives to express the manifoldness of the human experience, and hence to teach us something essential about ourselves: that we all have a share in the common, temporal project; that history is the trail of our common hope. In disclosing for us this essential Truth, the literary vision overflows all limitations.

### GOOD AND EVIL

In principle, the guiding animus of literature is to examine the Good as well as the Evil side of our humanity. Therefore, the overflowing of boundaries cannot be seen as an inevitable movement toward the Sublime. Early in his career, Vargas Llosa followed George Bataille rather closely. Literature, he argued, expresses best the Evil side of the human condition. This meant the writer experiences, examines, and discloses that which the rest of us would rather keep from view. There was more: it was not only that literature provides the occasion for reflection on such Evil reality. Literature, Vargas Llosa argued then, sustains, defends, even admires, the Evil side of humanity. And yet, it is important to note that, even in the moments when he was closest to Bataille, Vargas Llosa managed to put some distance between them. While agreeing that literature must often begin from the Evil side, he also noted that, when seen in its proper dimensions, literature is most profound when it strives to speak about the totality of human experience.<sup>4</sup>

The need for such a corrective is self-evident. The literary act is more than a vehicle for the release of pent-up resentment, forbidden desires, or hidden daemons. The artistic vision strains to offer us glimpses of the Good Life as well. This position was more thoroughly developed by Vargas Llosa later in his career. But, of course, the matter is even more complicated than that. The very premises of Bataille's offerings and Vargas Llosa's corrective stand in need of reflection. How are we to understand what is Evil and what is Good in any given society, never mind Humanity?

### CONTINGENCIES

From the standpoint of much current social theorizing, if we bracket out the larger question and talk only about Western societies (we must neutralize the necessary nuances of even that complex, of course), the only way to make sense of this conception of literature is by assuming that it expresses what is considered

Good or Evil by the “normal” society that gives it ground. In this case, what is Good or Evil would not be defined by the literary vision itself, but by the society of which it is a part. The “and yet” of literature would then be grounded not in its own insights regarding Good and Evil, but in an already established conception of the Good Life. The pugilistic stance Vargas Llosa wishes to assign to literature would then become contrariness. The conception of art as a particular kind of knowing, something Kant had celebrated, would be left behind.

Let us take a closer look. Since at least the nineteenth century—under the impact of the lifetime efforts by such founders of modern social theory as Marx, Nietzsche, Weber, Freud, and Durkheim—it has become a truism in the Western sociotheoretical tradition that not only the conception of Good and Evil but also Good and Evil themselves are historically contingent. No modern Western intellectual can now speak for Evil without, at the same time, questioning his or her own position; because the possibility of choosing to stand above Good and Evil in order to then take sides is given only with the undermining of all truth-claims. One person’s Evil is always someone else’s Good. Hence, taking the side of Evil, or letting Evil speak—through literature—could be equally, and perhaps more correctly, understood as speaking for a particular conception of Good.

In general terms, Vargas Llosa agrees with the main representatives of the Western sociotheoretical tradition. He accepts that what he might consider Evil in Peruvian society—as a concrete manifestation of Evil in general—might well be seen as a Good by other Peruvians. There is a strong relativist component in his aesthetic and critical production. However (and here we encounter an instance of an oscillation that is endemic to his work), he does not wish to fall prey to the paralyzing embrace of relativism. Against the insights of Western social theory, he wishes to hold that literature discloses some Truth. In other words, Vargas Llosa embraces Kant’s notion of the aesthetic as a way of knowing.

Furthermore, he attempts to overcome the relativism entailed in the modern discourse of Good and Evil by insisting that a writer ought not be interested in taking sides. Echoing Max Weber’s famous injunction, he holds that an artist can embrace the aesthetic daemon fully; that it alone ought to hold the fibers of his very life.<sup>5</sup> Vargas Llosa believes, as did Weber, that objectivity can be attained by the sheer weight of honest commitment. But, of course, the hope nestled in the claim is highly debatable, to say the least.

### VIRILE MATURITY

The stance above Good and Evil presupposes a writer willing and able to face the world devoid of illusions; perhaps to show what Georg Lukacs called “virile maturity.” A difficult posture to maintain, surely. But Vargas Llosa does not believe it impossible; the writer can indeed approximate an olympic figure. Contemplating the chaos that is human existence, the writer can attempt to provide order, if only

in his imagined world. Contemplating a stifling existing order, the writer can attempt to portray mystery, playfulness, or absurdity. In other words, the writer can both introduce a skeptical standpoint, which helps to break the spell of the norm, and provide glimpses of a better world. It is in this context that the full extent of Vargas Llosa's notion of the *elemento añadido* (added element) in literature can be appreciated. In his offerings, the writer intends an imaginative reconstruction of reality. In and through his art, argues Vargas Llosa, leaving Kant's pietistic modesty behind, the writer competes with God: he aims at rectifying His creation.<sup>6</sup>

Needless to say, we postmodern intellectuals need convincing that the writer is capable of approaching an olympic figure. Minimally, we would have to be shown that the notion of "genius," that mischievous Western cultural valuation, conveys adequately whatever it is that makes possible the privileged standpoint of the artist as someone-who-knows. For there is no question that Vargas Llosa's conception of the writer harks back to the Kantian conception of genius, which lingered for decades in the hollow halls of the Western academy. It seems as though it only appeared that, under the impact of modernity, such a conception of the artist had withered away, together with the social substratum that made it possible. Since Vargas Llosa claims the writer is a supplanter of God, it behooves us to listen. A resurrection might be in the offing.

### **ELEMENTOS AÑADIDOS AND THE NOVEL**

In his philosophical essay on the novel form, Georg Lukacs reiterates an idea that had been formulated with regard to bourgeois art more generally: the rise of the genre is deeply connected with the development of capitalism and the attendant modernity in the West. Therefore, the most recent literary formation is the epic of a world abandoned by God; it is the manifestation of radical skepticism. This is so, to paraphrase Octavio Paz, because the novel functions as an acid that corrodes the social world; it questions the reality of reality and embraces the utter relativity of Good and Evil. As we have seen, Vargas Llosa concurs.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, he oscillates. In a world abandoned by God, and therefore bereft of asymptotes for leading the Good Life, Vargas Llosa holds, the writer of novels feels an inner compulsion to "improve" on reality by offering Truth. In other words, against Lukacs's caution, Vargas Llosa believes the writer must take upon his shoulders the burden of providing a more rounded and integrated world.

The literary corrective to the world of God can be seen on two levels: first, as an effective supplantation of God in the fictive world. That is, in literature, the writer can create a world taking into account humanity's historically developed imaginings and desires. In this sense, literature aims to reiterate the old view of the aesthetic as a protest against the finitude of existence. But Vargas Llosa often writes and behaves as if the deicidal deed aims further. As an artist, he claims, the writer has something important to say about the "real" world as well. On this



second level, the corrective act consists in adding something to reality that the artist either perceives as missing or intuitively as repressed. In fact, the success of the deed can be taken as a marker for the distinction between great and lesser works. The *elemento añadido* is the Truth offered by aesthetics.

## SOURCES

The *elemento añadido*, the aesthetic contribution over against God, Vargas Llosa claims, might issue from a variety of sources: psychological, biological, or mystical, which might be felt as resentment, nostalgia, rage, or despair.<sup>8</sup> From his extant writing, it is difficult to ascertain exact sources. What is clear is that the aesthetic Truth is not necessarily grounded on Reason. Its claim to universality rests on its power to tap the sediment of memories and feelings that humanity has achieved in its long trajectory over time. *Elementos añadidos* are akin to Kantian synthetic judgments.

In the Western world, where the achievements of science tend to smother all ways of knowing save the scientific method, this *elemento añadido* seems to give the novel an independence that permits it to tap into alternative ways of knowing and being. This is the main reason why the novel for Vargas Llosa could never be supplanted by anthropology, sociology, or psychology. The *elemento añadido* is the contribution of an artist's originality and creativity. The originality and creativity of an author, therefore, ought not to be judged only in terms of technical prowess or the felicitous use of language. The function of technique is to enhance the possibilities of the *elemento añadido*.<sup>9</sup>

## ELEMENTOS AÑADIDOS AND LITERARY INDEPENDENCE

It is well known that writers of the Latin American "boom"—Carlos Fuentes, Julio Cortázar, José Donoso, García Márquez, in addition to Vargas Llosa himself—wished to distance themselves from their nineteenth-century predecessors, who they believed had labored under misguided approaches to art (such as regionalism, parochial versions of naturalism and romanticism, Indigenismo, and social realism). In the context of art as a way of knowing, Vargas Llosa wishes to call attention to one particular shortcoming: the tradition of writers such as Ciro Alegría and Rómulo Gallegos was much too content to borrow not only the form and content of their creations from Europeans, but the *elementos añadidos* as well. In other words, mimesis took the place of originality and creativity. This is the main reason why artistic works from Latin America prior to the midcentury rang hollow.

(It is interesting to note that in order to contribute his own *elementos añadidos* to the Latin American—and the world—literary tradition, Vargas Llosa had to

become more and more European; that he gained his originality by immersing himself in the tradition his predecessors had, according to him, merely copied. This immanent project, which demanded that he risk losing himself in order to know himself, has scarred the long trajectory of his love-hate relationship with Peru and Latin America. The trajectory reached a precarious resting place a few years ago when he became a Spaniard.)

### LITERATURE AND FREEDOM

Gustave Flaubert was a likable bourgeois and an unlikely rebel. And yet, Vargas Llosa points out, it is precisely he who, through his art, has endured in the Western tradition as an incisive critic of his times. Following Flaubert, Vargas Llosa also believes that great literature will always be dangerous to the powers that be. This is the reason why such powers—state, party, religion, and the Many—will always try to control it. The threat to literature was greater in the past, he thinks, when societies had not progressed enough. For history shows that the high valuation of a free imagination is a good indicator of the level of civilization a society has attained. All mature societies tolerate an active imagination; they find it a necessary risk—the price of freedom.<sup>10</sup>

Vargas Llosa means to defend an artistic vision, not the animus of a political track. Within his Latin American tradition, he faults Indigenismo and social realism for compromising the artistic vision in view of political aims. The aesthetic critique of reality, he reiterates, is not necessarily consciously undertaken. On the contrary, the most fruitful and radical insights into alternative value systems offered by aesthetics issue from the unconscious play of the imagination. This was certainly the case with Flaubert, whose creative genius produced insights that were at odds with his consciously held sociopolitical interests. His insights into the havoc caused by the rise of capitalism are deftly woven in his art. When the author is given to preaching a consciously held political position, Vargas Llosa holds, he courts falling prey to a paternalistic and totalitarian animus.<sup>11</sup> Art demands absolute devotion.

### OSCILLATIONS

We have encountered here the first instances of Vargas Llosa's oscillation between relativism and universalism. On the one hand, he refuses to draw the logical conclusion of the Western sociotheoretical tradition—deftly demonstrated by postmodernist writers such as Foucault, Derrida, and Lacan—and embrace relativism. On the other, he ignores the erosion of the grounding values of this tradition (Logos, Dialectic, Science) and holds fast to universalist values. In other words, Vargas Llosa wishes to have it both ways. Social theorists such



as Marx or Freud got away with this oscillation because at the core of their theories they retained untheorized positive values from the Western tradition, such as Justice and Freedom. In a postmodern world, such valuations are no longer taken for granted; they stand in need of justification. These days, even within the ongoing Western sociotheoretical tradition, a return to the nineteenth-century stance is considered either naive or disingenuous. The Kantian notion of genius is no longer enough.