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A passion for freedom : Mario Vargas Llosa was shaped by authoritarianism

The Peruvian novelist and liberal died on April 13th, aged 89



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Full text:

His manners were impeccable. That was the first impression Mario Vargas Llosa made on others. He was polite and cordial, his fluent conversation punctured by the tic of a nervous laugh. Yet, as with many great rationalists, beneath the polished surface lay a man of passion.

In his case, it was a passion for freedom—cultural, political and personal. From that came the themes that lay at the heart of many of his novels: the struggle of the individual against dictatorship, and the temptation of utopia, deadly when applied to politics (as it so often was in Latin America). In that field, he was not just an acute observer but also an unsuccessful participant.

He discovered politics at the age of 12, when General Manuel Odría overthrew a democratic government in Peru headed by a cousin of his maternal grandfather. It contributed to his lifelong hatred of dictators. So too did his authoritarian and abusive father. It was not until he was ten that Mario, nurtured by numerous maternal relatives, was told his father was not dead but had abandoned his wife and son.

Already, the boy knew he wanted to be a writer. His father, after returning, sent him to Lima's military academy, hoping it would knock literature out of him. Perched above the Pacific on a foggy cliff, its clammy claustrophobia and sadistic bullying gave him his first novel, entitled in English "The Time of the Hero". At 26, he was catapulted into the group of talented Latin American writers who achieved fame in the 1960s and 1970s, including Gabriel García Márquez and Carlos Fuentes. Like García Márquez, he later won the Nobel prize. But their close friendship ended in a quarrel—over women, he said much later. Passion, always passion.

On leaving school, he had worked as a cub reporter on a Lima tabloid, covering crime and hanging out in low-life dives. That provided material for "Conversation in the Cathedral". Set during Odría's rule, it was a fierce indictment of dictatorship, in which unchecked power unleashed moral degradation and sexual perversion. Like "The Time of the Hero" it bore what became his stylistic trademarks: a narrative that cut between multiple stories, written with a craftsman's precision. It was a subject he returned to in "The Feast of the Goat", on the misrule, torture and sexual depravity of Rafael Leonidas Trujillo, a dictator in the Dominican Republic. In "The War of the End of the World" he addressed the search for utopia through the prism of a backland rebellion in north-east Brazil in the 1890s.

His inspirations were Jean-Paul Sartre, William Faulkner and above all Gustave Flaubert, from whom he learned to be obsessively careful of form, writing and structure. Like Flaubert, he saw literature as a serious vocation. And as a realist writer, he deeply researched his novels. Though he looked like a Latin American playboy, he was a hard and disciplined worker. Each morning he rose early, went for a walk, and then sat down

for several hours of writing. In the afternoons, he would correct. He drank little, although towards the end he enjoyed long lunches with friends and good Spanish Rioja.

His output was prodigious: 20 novels, several books of essays, plays and short stories. From 1990 to 2023 he wrote a fortnightly column in *El País*, a Spanish newspaper. He could write humorously too, in books such as “Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter”, a hilarious farce, or the black comedy of “The Bad Girl”, a veiled satire on what he saw as the rape of Peru by Alberto Fujimori, its authoritarian ruler in the 1990s. He was also the Spanish-speaking world’s most perceptive literary critic, publishing essays not just on Flaubert but on the novel and on Peru’s indigenous writers.

Politics was never far away. In his pursuit of freedom he at first embraced the Cuban revolution and then rejected it, because it stifled cultural liberty. Disillusioned, he began a long journey towards liberalism, accelerated by living in England under Margaret Thatcher, whom he met and admired. In Latin America, where the intellectual class tends to the radical left, this was a brave stance that won him enemies. He put it into practice in Peru: when a leftist president tried to nationalise the banks, he plunged into a quixotic and successful campaign to stop it. That led to a run for the presidency in 1990. His discomfort with the flesh-pressing of campaigning was palpable. He lost, to Fujimori.

Some lovers of his novels hated his political columns. But he believed that the failures of the hard left were pushing Latin America his way. He became a kind of conscience, for Peru and for the region. Liberalism was not just concomitant with progressive democracy, but also included accepting that one might be wrong.

The same principle applied in his own life. Maybe because of the trauma of his father’s rejection, he married twice within his mother’s extended family. In 2015 he abruptly left Patricia, his wife of 50 years and first cousin, for Isabel Preysler, an ageing Spanish-Filipina socialite. She was a pillar of *¡Hola!*, a gossip magazine which he had pilloried in an essay. The affair was a mistake. In his final years, his mind dimming, he returned to Patricia and the house they shared (by then on separate floors) overlooking the ocean in the Lima district of Barranco.

From his 20s he had lived mainly in Europe. He was the most universal of Latin American writers. He hated nationalism as much as communism. But he was umbilically attached to his country. Peru, he wrote, was for him a kind of incurable disease from which he could not free himself. His final novel, published in 2023, “*Le dedico mi silencio*” (“I give you my silence”), was a bittersweet reflection on his country, dedicated to Patricia.

The book’s protagonist is a failed journalist who dreams of uniting his country through *la canción criolla*, an elegant Peruvian musical style. It is a utopia, but a benign one, expressing Peru’s rich cultural creativity. Of that, he was the foremost example. ■