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# Mario Vargas Llosa

## *An Intellectual Journey*

—♦—  
JULIO H. COLE

If one reads all his work, beginning with his first novels, one can see that Vargas Llosa has always preferred brilliant realists and mocking moderates to utopians and fanatics.

—Orhan Pamuk, “Mario Vargas Llosa and Third World Literature”

**M**ario Vargas Llosa, one of the world’s greatest living writers, was recently awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature for 2010, the latest in a long series of awards and prizes honoring a distinguished and prolific literary career.

In the Spanish-speaking world, however, he is more than just a great novelist. He is a public intellectual in the full sense of that expression, and his regularly aired opinions on political events, literature, culture, and the arts are a fixture of the intellectual life of this part of the world. His writing is always intelligent and urbane. Moreover, it is informed by a definite point of view, which is that of a classical liberal. Indeed, he is undoubtedly the most prominent expositor of this point of view writing in the Spanish language today.<sup>1</sup>

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1. All of Vargas Llosa’s fictional works are available in English translation, but most of his critical work is not. To date, three essay collections by Vargas Llosa have been published in English (1996, 2004, and 2007), and more will almost certainly follow as a result of the Nobel award. In addition, he has published in English two nonfiction books based on university lectures (1991 and 2008).

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## The Young Writer as a Man of the Left

It was not always so. Indeed, given his current prominence as a spokesman for classical liberalism, it is easily forgotten that as a young man Vargas Llosa was a typical “man of the left.” Like most intellectuals coming of age in the 1950s and early 1960s, he was closely identified with left-wing causes, and he greatly admired the Cuban Revolution. This ideological stance was in part owing to the prevailing climate of opinion among intellectuals at the time, especially in France, where he spent his formative years as a struggling young writer. Two other factors were a personality that has always exhibited a strong antiauthoritarian streak and the association of authoritarianism in Latin America with right-wing regimes.

He eventually became convinced, however, that armed revolution was not a real option for improving social conditions in Latin America and that gradual reform within a functioning democratic polity was the only way to achieve social justice.<sup>2</sup> He consequently became increasingly interested in the preconditions for a well-functioning democratic society.

This interest was not merely intellectual or academic. During the 1980s, he became personally involved in political activism, to the point of running for the presidency of Peru during the 1990 elections. He was defeated by Alberto Fujimori, who later imposed one of the most brutal and corrupt dictatorships in that country’s history. Peru’s loss was the world’s gain, however, because as a result of this experience Vargas Llosa essentially withdrew from active political militancy, and since then his literary output has continued unabated. Books and essays have flowed from his pen in a constant stream, and his bibliography includes a remarkable political memoir (Vargas Llosa [1993] 1994), which relates in painstaking detail the joys and sorrows of his political campaign.<sup>3</sup>

The distance between his early beliefs and his current convictions is evident in two contrasting assessments of a “canonical” text of the revolutionary left—the “Diary” of Che Guevara—: “If the Latin American revolution occurs according to the method proposed by Che, following the stages that he envisioned, the *Diary* will be an extraordinary document, a historical account of the most difficult and heroic moment of the continent’s liberation,” he wrote in 1968. “If the revolution does not occur . . . the *Diary* will still endure, as a testament to the most generous and most daring individual adventure ever attempted in Latin America” (reprinted in Vargas Llosa 1986a, 214, my translation). That was then. Twenty-five years later Vargas Llosa had come to believe that Che’s revolutionary strategy “did not work anywhere,” and its only result was that “thousands of young people who adopted it and

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2. On the events and circumstances that explain Vargas Llosa’s gradual disenchantment with Cuban socialism and his strained relations with the Latin American Left during this stage of his career (late 1960s and early 1970s), see Kristal 1998, 69–98.

3. For an extremely insightful review of this work, see Guillermprieto 2001.

attempted to put it into practice [ended up] sacrificing themselves tragically and opening the doors of their countries to cruel military tyrannies.” Instead of offering solutions, Che’s ideas and his example “contributed more than anything to undermine democratic culture and to plant in universities, trade unions and political parties in the Third World a contempt for elections, pluralism, formal liberties, tolerance and human rights as being incompatible with authentic social justice. This delayed by at least two decades the political modernization of Latin America” (1996, 295).

### Confronting Latin American Reality

In his narrative work, Vargas Llosa expressed this shift in his political and social thought most forcefully in two major novels of the early 1980s: *The War of the End of the World* (*La guerra del fin del mundo* [(1981) 1984]) and *The Real Life of Alejandro Mayta* (*Historia de Mayta* [(1984) 1986b]). Both of these novels deal, in different ways, with the myopia that renders ideological adversaries incapable of understanding their opponents’ viewpoints. As Vargas Llosa himself later explained (in commenting on *Mayta*), he came to realize that *all* ideologies are fictions and that instead of providing solutions, they were making problems even worse:

Many young people, many intellectuals, many avant-garde politicians were using ideology, were using these political ideas that presumed to describe reality . . . and were, in fact, adding to reality a purely imaginary world. It seemed to me strange that this fiction . . . was a major source of violence and brutality in Latin America; that these sometimes elaborate and complex ideological constructions in which one society was described and then another ideal society was also described as a goal to be reached through revolution . . . were, in fact, a mechanism that was destroying our societies and creating major obstacles to real progress. (1991, 149–50)

Prior to *The War of the End of the World*, all of Vargas Llosa’s fictional writings had dealt with Peru, his homeland. In fact, he had often stated that he was incapable of writing about any other place. He now proved otherwise, producing what many still consider his greatest work of fiction, a book that he himself has described as “the author’s favorite of his novels” (1991, 123). It deals with another place and another time, and it is, moreover, the story of a real event, a peasant uprising in northeastern Brazil during the late nineteenth century, led by a charismatic prophet known as Antônio Conselheiro (the Counselor), who began his career as a wandering preacher in the parched and drought-stricken province of Bahía, repairing churches, tending cemeteries, and teaching his own idiosyncratic version of Catholic fundamentalism. Political changes in Brazil’s far-off power centers—collapse of the monarchy and establishment of a republic in 1889—events about which the simple backlands dwellers had only the vaguest ideas, would have

ramifications whose cumulative effect would lead to horror and disaster on an unimaginable scale.

The tragedy was triggered by the collision of two antagonistic worldviews: Conselheiro and his tradition-minded followers felt threatened by the rush of modernizing reforms implemented by the progressive elites who now controlled the new republic. Among other aberrations, the republic had separated church and state and had instituted civil marriage—“as if a sacrament created by God were not enough” ([1981] 1984, 20).<sup>4</sup> It had also introduced a new and alien set of weights and measures (the metric system) and had even proposed to take a census. The latter measure was the last straw because in the Conselheiro’s view it was quite obviously designed to enable the government to identify freedmen in order to put them back in chains.<sup>5</sup> He could only conclude that “the Antichrist is abroad in the world; his name is Republic” (22). Rebellion in the name of the legitimate authority (that is, the monarchy) was therefore justified, and the Conselheiro’s followers proceeded to burn the government’s edicts, refused to pay taxes, and gathered at the former plantation of Canudos to prepare for the government’s assault. The rebels successfully drove back three military expeditions sent to suppress them. The uprising was eventually crushed, but only after a fourth expedition, armed with heavy artillery, laid siege to Canudos for two months. Many thousands were slaughtered.

Vargas Llosa’s treatment of this story is a fictionalized version of a famous account of the rebellion written by Euclides da Cunha ([1902] 1944), a journalist who accompanied the fourth and final expedition. In Vargas Llosa’s reading of these events, their meaning for our time lies in illustrating the destructive power of fanaticism. The Conselheiro, who sees a vast conspiracy bent on wiping out the last remnant of true believers in the Blessed Jesus, is obviously a fanatic. But so are his main opponents, most notably the commander of the third expedition, Colonel Moreira César, who is convinced that the peasant uprising is a smokescreen and part of a larger plot by reactionary landlords and British agents to restore the monarchy. As he tells the Baron de Cañabrava, a conservative landlord: “Objectively, these people [the peasants of Canudos] are the instruments of those who, like yourself, have accepted the Republic the better to betray it” (217).

“Because they [the progressive intellectuals of Brazil] could not understand what was happening,” Vargas Llosa later explained, “they did what all intellectuals do when they fail to understand something: they invented a theory. . . . The monarchists were the people really responsible for the rebellion. And England was also responsible because it was a natural enemy of the republic” (1991, 128). “What fascinated me about the Canudos phenomenon was how these ideologies, which were totally impermeable to direct experience, managed to blind those two sectors of

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4. Subsequent citations to *The War of the End of the World* are to the [1981] 1984 translation and are given as parenthetical page references.

5. Slavery in Brazil had been abolished by the monarchy in 1888.

Brazilian society and bring them to the point of killing each other in that fashion. I was so fascinated by this because it was a phenomenon we were experiencing in Latin America at that moment, those absolutely insurmountable divisions among social groups basically due to ideological and political fictions” (in Rebaza-Soraluz 1997, 20).

Into the deadly brew of confusion and misunderstanding that Vargas Llosa depicts in *The War of the End of the World*, a third, foreign element is added in the person of Galileo Gall, an expatriate European radical who seeks to make common cause with the rebels. As a modern free thinker, he of course detests religion, but he sees the rebellion as a protorevolutionary force to be encouraged and, if possible, guided: “Those poor devils represent the most worthy thing there is on this earth, suffering that rises up in rebellion” (249). Gall thinks of himself as a scientist, but he cannot avoid viewing events through the prism of his own ideological preconceptions.

The character who plays the role of da Cunha in the novel is, significantly, an extremely nearsighted journalist who can see only through very thick glasses. José Miguel Oviedo points out perceptively that

when the journalist arrives in Canudos and discovers the truth of the matter, so different from what he thought when he wrote his dispatches from Bahía, he is almost literally blind: his eyeglasses are shattered and he moves around groping among shadows . . . that is, he cannot *see* the physical reality that he alone appears to understand better than anyone. . . . [This depiction] serves to illustrate one of the novel’s great themes: the inability to see without ideological lenses and understand reality as a chiar-oscuro that defies our rational concepts. The drama of Canudos is the blindness of the human spirit, which refuses to accept that which does not fit into the mold of its convictions or prejudices, inventing [instead] a reality fit to measure. (1982, 650–51, my translation)

Although the issues involved in the Canudos war are long forgotten, Vargas Llosa’s observations and intuitions about the distorting lenses of ideology are of course much more broadly relevant and applicable—which should be apparent to anyone who takes a dispassionate look, *mutatis mutandis*, at our own post-9/11 world. The similarity between the story of Canudos and the rise of Islamic jihadism as well as the neoconservative response in the United States is almost eerie.

The characterization of Galileo Gall is obviously a stab at today’s progressive intelligentsia and reflects Vargas Llosa’s gradual movement away from the left. Even more symptomatic of this transition is his portrayal of the aristocratic Baron de Cañabrava, the novel’s fourth major character. Indeed, some critics argue that his favorable treatment of the baron indicates that Vargas Llosa had finally made his peace with the Latin American elites. In any event, the baron is unquestionably one of the few really sympathetic characters in the whole story. At times, he seems to be the only

sensible and clear-headed person around, and he is appalled by the sight of a mad world spinning out of control: “The Baron felt a shiver down his spine; it was as if the world had taken leave of its reason and blind, irrational beliefs had taken over” (246).

The baron’s key traits are flexibility and willingness to compromise, which are invariably portrayed in a positive light. Against the twin fanaticisms engulfing his world, his pragmatism sounds like the voice of sweet reason: “We must make our peace,” he tells an associate. “Let us keep our Republic from turning into what so many other Latin American republics have: a grotesque witches’ sabbath where all is chaos, military uprisings, corruption, demagoguery” (349). He is not optimistic, however, and he realizes that the events he is witnessing are a harbinger of things to come:

“We’re at war,” Gall says, “and every weapon counts.”

“Every weapon counts,” [the baron] repeated softly. “That is a precise definition of the times we’re living in, of the twentieth century that will soon be upon us, Mr. Gall. I’m not surprised that those madmen think that the end of the world has come.” (250)

*The War of the End of the World* is a large, multilayered novel with scores of characters, and it can obviously be read at many levels. It can be read, for example, as a meditation about the clash of modernity and backwardness—the *Conselheiro*, after all, is rebelling against the very idea of progress. It can also be read, however, as a rejection of a false dichotomy that has plagued Latin America throughout the twentieth century: revolutionary violence versus military repression. Neither of these courses of conduct, Vargas Llosa had come to believe, is the solution for Latin America’s problems. At an even more basic level, the novel is a plea for tolerance and a rejection of fanaticism and dogmatic belief in all of its forms: “The Baron recognized that tone of voice. . . . The tone of absolute certainty, he thought, the tone of those who are never assailed by doubts” (245).<sup>6</sup>

By the time this work was published, Vargas Llosa had clearly crossed the threshold of the open society. The novel was his manifesto.

### Settling Scores with the Left: *Historia de Mayta*

*Mayta* is the story of a failed insurrection in a small town in the Peruvian highlands a year before the Cuban Revolution. It is also the story of the narrator’s attempt to reconstruct the insurrection’s history and the background of its leader, Alejandro Mayta, an idealistic if somewhat ineffectual middle-aged Trotskyite. It is furthermore

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6. The novel can also be read, of course, as simply a good story, an interpretation that at least one of its characters—namely, the Midget, a member of a traveling circus who makes a living by reciting popular legends of medieval romance and adventure—would prefer. Asked about the moral significance of one of his tales, he replies defensively: “I don’t know, I don’t know. . . . It’s not in the story. It’s not my fault, don’t hurt me. I’m just the storyteller” (557).

an opportunity to reflect, from a distance of several decades, on the participants' motivations and to illustrate the subjectivity of memory.

The narrator is a fictional version of Vargas Llosa himself, and he skillfully adapts the medium of fiction writing to write a story about the making of a story. Although the story is structured as an investigation of real events, the investigation's purpose is to collect materials for a fictionalized version of those same events, and the result is the very book the reader is reading, itself obviously and explicitly a work of fiction. This setup means, of course, that we never really know if the Mayta we are reading about is the "real" Mayta or the "fictional" Mayta (not even when we actually meet the "real" Alejandro Mayta toward the end of the story). *Mayta* is a literary tour de force and is therefore of interest in its own right as an experiment in the possibilities of narrative exploration. It is more than that, however, because it is also a vehicle for the expression of the author's views (the "real" author's views) about society and the role of ideology.

Although the investigation pertains to events that occurred in Peru in the late 1950s, the narration is set in a rather dystopian version of Peru in the early 1980s. Things were bad enough in the *real* Peru at the time: debt crisis, runaway inflation, and rampaging terrorist groups setting off bombs and murdering at random. The novel's fictional Peru is, if anything, in even worse straits, as the narrator lets us know in no uncertain terms. The novel starts and ends with visions of Lima, the capital city, as a vast garbage dump: "The spectacle of misery was once limited exclusively to the slums, then it spread downtown, and now it is the common property of the whole city, even the exclusive residential neighborhoods" ([1984] 1986b, 4).<sup>7</sup> And "On all sides, there are mounds of garbage. The people, I suppose, just throw it out of their houses, resigned, knowing that no city garbage truck is ever going to pick it up" (309). Peru, in short, is in deep trouble. The question is, What brought about this dire condition?

Vargas Llosa, we now know, had by the time he wrote this novel given up on the old Marxist explanations. Mayta and his associates, though well intentioned, were misled by an inadequate diagnosis of their country's ills. The novel portrays the leftist cliques of the 1950s as clueless and irrelevant but harmless enough, and the doctrinal squabbles in which Mayta engages seem rather ridiculous but not really dangerous. When, at one point, a member of a rival Marxist party derisively describes Mayta's splinter group as "twenty-odd Peruvian Trots," Mayta replies: "Actually, there are only seven of us" (152).

Nonetheless, as the story progresses, a case is made that the underlying premise shared by all of these groups—the idea that revolutionary violence is the only solution to the country's problems—had been disastrous for Peru and for Latin America in general. Mayta's attempted insurrection was a pathetic failure, but by setting a precedent for the use of violence, "it charted the process that has ended in what we are all

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7. Subsequent citations to *The Real Life of Alejandro Mayta* are to the [1984] 1986b translation and are given as parenthetical page references.



living through now” (59). Once again “the message is that ideology is an illusion, and an illusion which leads ultimately to catastrophe” (Martin 1987, 224).

Vargas Llosa himself is quite honest and forthcoming regarding his own sense of personal responsibility for the ideological delusions he once shared. This personal *mea culpa* can be appreciated, for instance, in the following interview:

[*Raymond*] *Williams*: What about that young Peruvian intellectual I remember from 1966, that Mario Vargas Llosa who publicly supported guerilla movements as the possibility of change for Peru? How do you see that Vargas Llosa now?

*Vargas Llosa*: Well, I was totally engulfed in this collective enthusiasm that the Cuban Revolution had aroused among us. That was really the situation. And yes, I clearly recognize my own responsibility. The problem is that in Peru at that time it was impossible to imagine that this concept of violence as vehicle for social change could lead twenty years later to a phenomenon such as Shining Path. This is abstract violence, blind terror. Consequently, if you still believe that violence is a solution, you must accept blind terror. There are intellectuals and artists in Peru who are supporting violence. (Williams 1987, 205)

### **Errant Knight of the Liberal Imagination**

Vargas Llosa attributes much of his change in outlook to the influence of Isaiah Berlin and Karl Popper, both of whom he began to read and study in earnest in the late 1970s and early 1980s. One of the things he most admires about Berlin is his skepticism regarding claims to final answers for the world’s woes:

A constant in Western thought is the belief that one true answer exists for every human problem, and that once we find this answer, then all others must be rejected as mistaken. A complementary idea, as old as this one, is that most noble and inspiring ideas—justice, freedom, peace, pleasure, and so on—are compatible with one another. For Isaiah Berlin, these two beliefs are false, and many of the tragedies that have befallen humanity can be laid at their doorstep. From this skeptical base, Berlin produced a number of powerful and original arguments in favor of freedom of choice and ideological pluralism. (Vargas Llosa 2008, 139)<sup>8</sup>

As for Popper, a famous essay that Vargas Llosa wrote about this philosopher opens with a very strong statement: “Truth, for Karl Popper, is not discovered: it is

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8. On Berlin, see also Vargas Llosa 2007, 225–36.

invented” (2008, 160). Even allowing for “poetic license,” this statement seems like an extreme formulation of what is in fact a very complex and nuanced theory, although Vargas Llosa makes his case with his customary elegance. What this essay says about Popper, however, is not as interesting as what it says about Vargas Llosa himself. The Popperian emphasis on falsifiability, criticism, and provisional (but never unconditional) acceptance of scientific hypotheses clearly had an impact on Vargas Llosa’s own understanding of the world: “Popper’s theory of knowledge is the best philosophical justification for the ethical value that most characterizes democratic culture: tolerance. If there are no absolute and eternal truths, if the only way for knowledge to progress is by making and correcting mistakes, we should all recognize that our own truths may not be right and that what looks to us like our adversaries’ errors may in fact be correct” (2008, 165–66).

Thus, both Berlinean skepticism and Popperian uncertainty serve as antidotes to dogmatism and fanaticism, which are two great enemies of liberty in Vargas Llosa’s worldview. The struggle against dogma and fanaticism is a major theme in his literary *oeuvre* and a key element in all of his intellectual and political commitments. As he recently reiterated in his Nobel lecture,

[O]urs is the age of fanatics, of suicide terrorists, an ancient species convinced that by killing they earn heaven, that the blood of innocents washes away collective affronts, corrects injustices, and imposes truth on false beliefs. Every day, all over the world, countless victims are sacrificed by those who feel they possess absolute truths. With the collapse of totalitarian empires, we believed that living together, peace, pluralism, and human rights would gain the ascendancy and the world would leave behind holocausts, genocides, invasions, and wars of extermination. None of that has occurred. New forms of barbarism flourish, incited by fanaticism, and with the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, we cannot overlook the fact that any small faction of crazed redeemers may one day provoke a nuclear cataclysm. We have to thwart them, confront them, and defeat them. (2010, 3)

Mario Vargas Llosa was once described as “the errant knight of the liberal imagination” (Martin 1987). It is good to know that the liberal tradition in Spanish letters is still alive and well. It is also good to know that the Swedish Academy finally did justice to a true giant of world literature.

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