

TEMPTATION
OF THE **The**
WORD **Novels**
 of Mario
 Vargas
 Llosa

EFR A Í N
K R I S T A L

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Je suis dévoré maintenant par un besoin de métamorphoses. Je voudrais écrire tout ce que je vois, non tel qu'il est, mais transfiguré. La narration exacte du fait réel le plus magnifique me serait impossible. Il me faudrait le broder encore.

—Gustave Flaubert, letter to Louise Colbert, August 26, 1853.

More than others the artist is a child of his age, a vulnerable child, responsive to all the changes of its weather, cheered by its promises, riddled by its doubts, seduced by its fashions, infected by its vices.

—Stanley Kunitz, "The Temptations of the Artist"

C O N T E N T S

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INTRODUCTION

Time of the Hero (1962), Mario Vargas Llosa's first novel, generated a considerable amount of interest and enthusiasm in Latin America and Spain. After the publication of *The Green House* (1965) his reputation as a world-class writer was firmly established. Vargas Llosa came into literary prominence when many Latin American writers believed that their literature had finally come of age and that it would play a significant role in the social and political transformation of the Western Hemisphere. Carlos Fuentes's criticism of the political plutocracy that had usurped the socialist ideals of the Mexican revolution was a major theme in his early novels; and Gabriel García Márquez's most celebrated novel, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, expresses his socialist conviction that a people without solidarity is condemned to alienation. In the 1960s literary prestige gave clout to those writers who wished to diagnose the shortcomings of Latin America, especially if they expressed a measure of sympathy for the Cuban revolution. Like García Márquez and Fuentes—his most significant peers—Mario Vargas Llosa embraced the idea that literature had a political role to play. The young Peruvian believed that his novels were condemning capitalism in Latin America on the eve of a revolutionary period. He was eager to express his support for the Cuban revolution with the enthusiasm of a writer convinced that his new-found fame is emblematic of a momentous political change.

In the four decades that followed, Vargas Llosa was determined to reconcile his passion for literature with his political convictions. Not content with registering his own novels' consistency with his personal views, he has felt the

necessity to underscore the political significance of literature in general. In the 1960s he argued that any good work of literature is a boon to socialism because the main motivation for inventing alternative realities is a writer's dissatisfaction with the inequities of his own society. After his disenchantment with socialism in the 1970s, Vargas Llosa has argued that literature can serve as an escape valve for the violent propensities of those who are dissatisfied with life as they find it.

It was not enough for Vargas Llosa to claim that good literature has lofty political implications; he has argued that good literature is the product of absolute creative freedom. Vargas Llosa has respected writers who abandon their vocation to devote themselves to political causes, but he has not hidden his disdain for writers who sacrifice the literary integrity of their works in order to serve a political ideal. Aware that his views about creative freedom may be incompatible with his views about the political implications of literature, he has nevertheless insisted on both: in the 1960s he claimed that the freest and most spontaneous literary activity would have the greatest revolutionary force; and after his disenchantment with socialism he has made the more moderate claim that literature can appease human tendencies to incivility.

For the first time since he has been active as a writer, there are signs that politics may no longer be a central consideration in Vargas Llosa's views about artistic creation. In the play *Ojos Bonitos, Cuadros Feos* (1996) his three characters reflect on the connections between art and their lives: the philistine finds the artistic enterprise a useless nuisance, and the others, more artistically inclined, come to realize that the elusive compensations of artistic creation may be restricted to the very few.

Vargas Llosa's belief that art and literature necessarily serve a clear-cut political end could be on the wane for the first time since he has been an active writer, but politics continues to be a major source of inspiration for his own literary themes. He has often reflected about the significance of political ideas and situations in his creative process:

I have never wanted to use my novels as mere vehicles to express political ideas; but I do think that political facts and experiences generate a whole host of situations, of characters, of psychologies, and of anecdotes that are very tempting, for me, from the creative point of view. There are also political problems in the case of my own country and Latin America, which are of such relevance, such drama, such gravity, that it is impossible for me to ignore these matters, to isolate them from my own concerns and ambitions as a writer.¹

The political content of Vargas Llosa's novels has never betrayed his political convictions, but he has tried to avoid the temptation—fatal according to Flaubert—of the novelist who wishes to reproduce rather than to recreate reality. Vargas Llosa has had no qualms about transforming historical facts or biographical information to suit his literary purposes. His writing method involves the use of raw materials that he will modify in the creative process. He has always relied on but has never been faithful to his personal experience, research in specialized archives and libraries, other works of literature, the ideas of intellectuals he has admired, Latin American history, biographical information about people he has met, and so forth.

It is not necessary to command a thorough knowledge of these materials—Latin American history, for example—to enter into his literary world, because each of his novels is relatively self-contained. To understand how Vargas Llosa's novels were written, however, it is essential to study how he transformed and modified these raw materials. In addition, it is impossible to understand the origins of his literary themes if one ignores his political convictions and the vicissitudes of his political experiences: most notably his role as an intellectual spokesman for Latin American revolutionary movements in the 1960s; his unintended break with the Latin American Left after he was ostracized for criticizing the censorship and mistreatment of creative writers in Cuba in 1971; his period of activism for free-market democracy in Peru, which culminated in his failed bid for his country's presidency in 1990; and, more recently, his growing pessimism about political activity. Political ideas and experiences have inspired literary themes, anecdotes, characters, and situations that have also had a bearing on the development of his literary techniques. More importantly, his political convictions have had such an important place in his novels that the most relevant changes in his themes and literary techniques can be traced directly to them. It is, therefore, possible to divide his production as a novelist into distinct periods according to his changing political convictions.

Time of the Hero (1962), *The Green House* (1965), and *Conversation in The Cathedral* (1969) correspond to his socialist period. In these novels, upward mobility is unthinkable without moral degradation, and thoughtful individuals realize that their society is corrupt through and through. Vargas Llosa's literary themes were therefore in harmony with his conviction that capitalist society was too corrupt for reform. In his socialist period Vargas Llosa refined Faulknerian techniques; without sacrificing intrigue, strong emotions, or powerful action, he presents fictional events, thoughts, and dialogues by superimposing spatial and chronological planes.

Captain Pantoja and the Special Service (1973) and *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* (1977) are works of transition from his socialist to his neoliberal (or neocon-

servative) period.² These novels were written while Vargas Llosa was repudiated by his former friends and associates from the Latin American Left but before he had reoriented his political views. He reiterates some of the themes from the novels of the 1960s with humor and irony. In *Aunt Julia* the historical period that precedes the Cuban revolution is explicitly portrayed as a time of lost innocence.

With *The War of the End of the World* (1981) Vargas Llosa abandoned his socialist illusions, and he first explored a new theme in line with the concerns of antiauthoritarian liberalism: the fragility of a civilized coexistence assailed by fanatics, political opportunists, and well-intentioned but misguided idealists. If in his socialist period Vargas Llosa believed that man's feelings of dissatisfaction with his social world resulted from the nature of capitalism itself, in his neoliberal period Vargas Llosa believes that dissatisfaction results from the human condition. The novels of this period underscore the significance of fantasy and eroticism as palliatives against human feelings of discontentment that can always unravel in political violence. After losing the Peruvian elections, the theme of man's inherent dissatisfaction with his world has taken a disturbing turn: in *Death in the Andes* (1993) violence takes place for no discernible reason.

This book is first and foremost about Vargas Llosa's novels. The heart of my study is the analysis of every one of his novels from *Time of the Hero* to *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto* (1997).³ To explain how Vargas Llosa approached writing each of them, I analyze many of the same sources he used, including the literary and philosophical works that he read and reread while writing them.

Before outlining the specific contents of my study, I would briefly like to set out my approach to literature. My methodology involves my background in hermeneutics and in analytic philosophy.⁴ E. H. Gombrich once wrote that the more we know of an artist's palette, the more we are likely to appreciate his artistic choices.⁵ Much of my work entails the cultural and aesthetic reconstruction of Vargas Llosa's novels taking as a starting point his palette, so to speak. I am interested in understanding Vargas Llosa's cultural options and constraints as a writer who had wanted to offer his literary prestige to revolutionary causes and who later became an outspoken critic of socialism. Yet I am not satisfied with abstract speculation. I take seriously the fact that writers read and respond to specific texts as they write their own literary works. I wish to avoid the abuses of contemporary literary theory and to write with as little technical jargon as possible. I refuse to force literary analysis into the service of agreement or disagreement with Vargas Llosa's political views. One of the troubling fallacies in Vargas Llosa literary criticism—practiced by tendentious critics and by eminent literary figures alike—is to confuse the merits of Vargas Llosa's novels with the merits of their political content.

I am interested in understanding how Vargas Llosa wrote his novels, and this necessarily involves an interest in his political context while writing and in the wide literary context informing his craft. I am not simply arguing that there are intertextual connections between Vargas Llosa's novels and those of Faulkner, Joanot Martorell, Tolstoy, and Hugo, among many others, but that Vargas Llosa must have taken notes and used these works actively in the creation of his own works. Much of my research into this fascinating matter involved reading or rereading literary works that could have been useful to Vargas Llosa in his own writing. After making some fruitful connections—such as the significance of Faulkner's *Light in August* for *Time of the Hero*—I systematically studied those literary works that we know Vargas Llosa has read because he has written about them in essays and books. I continued with works that I believe he might well have read. Rather than pointing out every connection I found between his novels and his sources, I decided to select the most relevant and representative, as a way of gaining insight not only into Vargas Llosa's own education but into the process of creative borrowing that Vargas Llosa has used to make his own contribution.

Many of my insights were confirmed and fine tuned in the Mario Vargas Llosa Collection at Princeton's Firestone Library, where I was able to read the rough drafts of the novels as well as the notebooks in which he sketched out his literary ideas. In reading the drafts of *The Green House*, for example, I could pinpoint when the story of the infamous Fushía (which was inspired by notes Vargas Llosa took on a trip to the Peruvian jungle in 1956) was rewritten according to themes and structures drawn from Joseph Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness*. I am also grateful to Mr. Vargas Llosa who graciously read a draft of this book. His most important correction involves *The Real Life of Alejandro Mayta*. I had the intuition that the novel had something to do with Joseph Conrad's depiction of the political fanatic in Conrad's *The Secret Agent*. Mr. Vargas Llosa told me that the links with that novel were circumstantial, and he suggested that I reread *Under Western Eyes*.

Harold Bloom and George Steiner have both suggested that strong writers are strong critics when their fictional works respond in challenging ways to other fictional works.⁶ Vargas Llosa, in this sense, is not always a strong critic when it comes to his sources. In *Time of the Hero*, for example, he simply borrows techniques from Faulkner's *Light in August* for his own purposes.⁷ *The Real Life of Alejandro Mayta*, on the other hand, is a corrective to *Under Western Eyes* because Vargas Llosa transforms Conrad's conceits to undermine his notions about objectivity in literature.⁸

In this book I analyze all of Vargas Llosa's novels, and I believe that each analysis could be read on its own. When read as a whole, the individual analyses of

the novels show that some features are common to all the novels while others are associated with specific periods in his literary development. This reading sheds light on how literary techniques, themes, and character types appear, recur, and are transformed. In turn, the literary criticism at the core of this book is enriched by attending analyses of the intellectual currents and of the political ideas and experiences that resurface in Vargas Llosa's works. I explore the Peruvian intellectual milieu in which he became a writer as well as the ideas of the thinkers who influenced his views about literature and politics. Even though the book is about Vargas Llosa's novels, I draw from the entire corpus of his writings, including his many books of literary and political essays and his plays. I also underscore an irrationalist streak in all of Vargas Llosa's writings because it has been a fundamental feature of his moral and literary vision. At bottom he believes that the ultimate explanations of human desire and action are beyond reason. That said, he has passionately held that certain types of human conduct and behavior are morally unacceptable. His changing political convictions have always been reoriented around his views that a great deal of human motivation is inscrutable and that peaceful social coexistence is the only justification for curtailing an individual's freedom of action.

To the extent that his political experience is also at the heart of his literary changes, I have organized the book accordingly. Chapter 1 is an analysis of Vargas Llosa's attempt to reconcile his socialist convictions with his view that literature is the product of irrational forces he has often called the "demons" of creation. I explore the significance of the writers whose ideas played an important role in shaping his literary and political vision. I give special attention to the ideas of Jean Paul Sartre and to three Peruvian writers that Vargas Llosa knew personally and who influenced his intellectual career: Sebastián Salazar Bondy, José María Arguedas, and César Moro.

Chapter 2 begins with a summary of Vargas Llosa's basic ideas about the craft of fiction. They were inspired by Flaubert, and he has not modified them over the years. It then gives a brief overview of the early short stories before offering detailed analysis of the novels he wrote in the 1960s.

Chapter 3 analyses Vargas Llosa's unintended break with the Latin American Left as well as the effects of this development in the opportunistic field of Latin American literary criticism. It also analyzes the two novels he wrote before his neoliberal period.

Chapter 4 explores the ideas of Albert Camus, Isaiah Berlin, and Karl Popper, who are chief among the thinkers Vargas Llosa studied as he reoriented his political views. This chapter also examines his attempts to reconcile the ideas of these thinkers with his long-held doctrine about the irrational elements of literary creation, reinforced by his devoted readings of Georges Bataille.

Chapter 5 offers detailed analysis of the novels of the neoliberal period from *The War of the End of the World* until *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto*. The chapter is called “The novels of the 1980s,” but it includes Vargas Llosa's most recent novel because it is the sequel to *In Praise of the Stepmother*. The sequel has affinities to its antecedent, but it also has subtle differences that will help to set the tone for the conclusion, where I make general observations about all of Vargas Llosa's novels. I postpone the analysis of *Death in the Andes* until the conclusion because I believe that this novel suggests an important change in Vargas Llosa's literary trajectory, which I suspect will be as significant as his transition from the socialist to the neoliberal period.

Throughout this study, I have tried to avoid the pitfall of that literary criticism that overemphasizes Vargas Llosa's realism while overlooking his own inventions, his dialogues with other literary works, and his transmutations of lived experiences, readings, and ideas into self-contained literary works.

TEMPTATION OF THE WORD

The Writer's Commitment

If human needs could be satisfied, there would be no reason to invent alternative realities, but life's imperfections beget "negative obsessions—individual, social and cultural—that put man so much at odds with his own reality as to give rise to the desire to subvert reality by verbally reshaping it."¹ This is Mario Vargas Llosa's main insight regarding literature's *raison d'être*. Vargas Llosa has always claimed that a writer's dissatisfaction with society, his traumas, failures, and humiliations produce unconscious obsessions that are the stuff of literary creation. "The demon" has been his favorite image of a writer's hidden motivations and impulses. "Demons" are the writer's obsessions, the often irrational desire, forces, or tendencies responsible for his literary themes.

Goethe, the first to secularize demonic metaphors to discuss the nature of literary creation, was an indirect influence on Vargas Llosa, who was more directly affected by the demonic in Victor Hugo, Gustave Flaubert, the *poètes maudits* such as Rimbaud and Baudelaire, and in César Moro and George Bataille, advocates of the so called "literature of evil." Although the influence was indirect, it is still worthwhile to review briefly Goethe's idea of "Das Dämonische" (the demonic). Vargas Llosa has made passing references to the German classic in essays defining his own literary ideas, and some of his most important views on literary creation were first expressed by Goethe.²

Goethe's concept of "the demonic" expressed the notion that artistic creation is the product of unconscious forces divorced from reason or understanding.³ The demons not only stimulate an individual's imagination but also provide literary themes and modify those the writer has consciously decided to explore. Demons are to a writer what chance is to a gambler: they offer possibilities but do not ensure success. Not every writer is able to transform his obsessions into a good work of literature. For Goethe, the demonic also has social implications because it tends to agitate the creative imagination, especially in what he called those "dark" times when social life is in turmoil.

Like Goethe, Vargas Llosa sees literary creation as the product of irrational forces that determine or modify the subjects chosen by a writer. The raw material of literary creation is an unpredictable mixture of rational and irrational elements, and successful creation of a work of art from these elements depends on the writer's talent.⁴ During his socialist period, which lasted until about 1975, Vargas Llosa also claimed that the demons of literary creation were most prevalent in times of social upheaval. In making this last claim Vargas Llosa was more in tune with the views of Victor Hugo, one of his favorite novelists, than with those of Goethe. Vargas Llosa believed, like Hugo, that literature is not just a barometer of turbulent times, for it has an important role to play in denouncing social injustices and in undermining the status quo.⁵

The satanic images of the Romantics were taken up by twentieth century writers such as César Moro and Georges Bataille, both of whom strongly influenced Vargas Llosa's views on literature. These writers took surrealism as a starting point to explore the darker side of human nature and to defend literature as an activity where the uncensored imagination is free to explore a writer's most disturbing obsessions. This approach to literature is called *la littérature du mal* (or "literature of evil"), alluding to Georges Bataille's best-known essay, because it suggests a strong link between literature and transgression. In *Literature and Evil*, one of the books that most influenced Vargas Llosa, Bataille summarizes the literary history of "the satanic" from its theological to its secular versions. He links the Romantic images of the demonic with freedom:

[Liberty] is, as Blake said of Milton, "of the Devil's party without knowing it." Submission and obedience, on the other hand, are on the side of Good. Liberty is always open to revolt, while Good is as closed as a rule.⁶

Since the 1970s the name of Georges Bataille has often appeared in Vargas Llosa's essays. But long before, Vargas Llosa had been fascinated with writings and doctrines akin to those of Bataille. In 1960, two years before publishing *The*

Time of the Hero, Vargas Llosa had translated a scandalous anticlerical story by Rimbaud.⁷

Like the *poètes maudits*, Vargas Llosa could not conceive of a docile writer content with his own society or engaged in a serene dialogue with an inherited literary tradition. The writer is a “blind rebel,” and his work a “coded testimony” of rebelliousness against his own society. The writer does not simply represent reality as it is but modifies it by adding his own resentment:

[The writer’s work is] a reconstruction of reality and a testimony of his dissent. . . . Every novel is a coded testimony: a portrayal of the world not as it is but as modified by the novelist who has *added* his resentment, his nostalgia, his critique. This *additional element* is what makes a novel a creative and not merely an informative work.⁸

The writer’s own dissatisfaction—that “additional element” in a work of fiction—implies a rejection of the reality that tormented him in the first place. Unlike Flaubert, for whom a writer is to his work what God is to Creation, Vargas Llosa thinks of the writer as a “deicide” who rejects Creation by means of an alternative: the creation of a literary work.

Like other progressive writers in the 1960s, Vargas Llosa believed that the capitalist system had to be destroyed to establish socialism. Aware of and sometimes troubled by Stalinism, he nonetheless believed that the Soviet Union was the bulwark of political liberation for the entire world and that the Cuban revolution was the model for Latin Americans to follow. Social and political problems could not be peacefully resolved because it was inconceivable that the defenders of capitalism would voluntarily relinquish their privileges resulting from an uneven distribution of wealth. Vargas Llosa considered liberal democracy a scandalous farce because of its indifference to unemployment, extreme poverty, malnutrition, and other miseries that justify the violence of revolutionary movements.

From the 1950s when he first published his political views, until 1975 when he distanced himself from revolutionary socialism, Vargas Llosa sought to reconcile his conception of literature as a product of irrational forces with his commitment to pro-Soviet revolutionary movements. He wanted to show that the creative impulse is inherently at odds with capitalism, and that every authentic writer—even those who believe in art for art’s sake—ought to sympathize with revolutionary movements. He felt that South American writers have a heightened propensity for rebellion because they live in an environment of acute misery, and he believed that this propensity is made more acute by mundane

frustrations stemming from the primitive or practically nonexistent publishing industry and from rampant illiteracy greatly limiting a writer's potential reading public. Of course, the ultimate justification of a revolutionary movement is not society's indifference to literary creativity but poverty, corruption, and the injustice of any capitalist society.⁹

LITERATURE AND REVOLUTION

Although he acknowledged that liberal democracies respect the principles of freedom—specifically artistic freedom—Vargas Llosa thought, like other socialist intellectuals, that “freedom” under capitalism is not authentic because it is not founded on economic equality.¹⁰ Vargas Llosa opposed censorship and believed that “only socialism, by laying the foundations of true social justice, can render expressions such as ‘freedom of opinion’ and ‘creative freedom’ truly meaningful.”¹¹

He first expressed his ideal of the intellectual who is faithful both to art and to the revolution in his 1956 essay on José Carlos Mariátegui (1894–1930), whom he considered a model for his own political and literary ideals. Vargas Llosa regarded Mariátegui as a pro-Soviet intellectual fully committed to the revolution and a defender of aesthetic freedom who had found a balance between literature and politics: “Mariátegui the artist and writer, who coexisted with Mariátegui the revolutionary, achieved that spiritual equilibrium that is undoubtedly the main reason for the lasting relevance of his work.”¹²

Vargas Llosa's analysis of Mariátegui echoes the themes of his friend and mentor Sebastián Salazar Bondy's evaluation of Mao Zedong in *Literatura*, a short-lived literary journal for which both writers worked in 1958 (along with José Miguel Oviedo, who later became Vargas Llosa's most distinguished literary critic). Salazar Bondy claimed that the Chinese revolution was superior to the Soviet revolution because Mao was an authentic poet committed both to Communism and to freedom of artistic expression.¹³ Salazar Bondy's naive but revealing appraisal, made a year prior to the Cuban revolution, was also Vargas Llosa's political ideal—a Communist revolution respectful of artistic freedom. In the 1960s, Vargas Llosa praised the triumph of the Cuban revolution precisely in those terms: “There are socialist countries—Cuba is the most advanced—where censorship barely operates, and state control of aesthetics is nonexistent.”¹⁴

Vargas Llosa could not conceive of an ideal society where artists would be forced to work according to any preconceived political agendas. Nonetheless, he felt uncomfortable with the notion of apolitical art—literature ought to be

both independent *and* revolutionary. He wanted to find a persuasive link between the demons of literary creation and socialism. To establish this link he needed to show that the revolt of a writer “who doesn’t know the profound reason for his rebellion” is itself a symptom of a crisis within capitalist society.¹⁵ To quote yet another of his favorite metaphors, he saw the novelist as a vulture who thrives on the established order’s death throes: “[Novelists are] a bit like vultures: they feed on rotting organisms. Novels are ideally suited to depict societies on the verge of collapse.”¹⁶ Vargas Llosa claimed that his conception of literature was socialist, but he opposed “socialist realism,” the official literary doctrine of international Communism, which demanded a literary portrayal of reality that would promote the ideological transformation of the proletariat. Although he insisted that all good literature somehow contributes to the revolution by denouncing social woes, Vargas Llosa did not believe that a writer ought to be *required* to write works for pedagogical or propagandistic purposes.

His best argument in favor of a simultaneously independent and revolutionary literature was speculative and somewhat muddled: it does not matter whether a writer is motivated consciously or unconsciously by the injustices of capitalism, for literature is inherently revolutionary: “All good literature is progressive, regardless of the author’s intentions.”¹⁷ He was convinced that the misery and injustice deriving from capitalism were the main sources of literary creation in Latin American countries, whether or not the creative writers were truly aware of it.

Vargas Llosa defended the Marxist-Leninist thesis that only the destruction of the existing system could create the necessary conditions for establishing social justice. While men of action such as Lenin and Castro are required to lead the revolution, good literature contributes to the cause by denouncing the established order.¹⁸ Literature’s political task is not to identify those problems that can be resolved through reform, but to demonstrate that in capitalism justice is impossible because of its intrinsic hypocrisy and corruption. The most famous essay in which he put forward this argument was “La literatura es fuego” (Literature is Fire), a speech he read in 1967 when he was awarded the Rómulo Gallegos prize for *The Green House*. In this speech—arguably the most widely disseminated statement in support of politically committed literature in Latin America of the nineteen sixties—he stated that great Latin American literature denounces injustice and that the entire continent is destined to follow the Cuban model:

The American reality, of course offers the writer a true surfeit of reasons to be rebellious and discontented. Societies where injustice is law, paradises of ignorance, exploitation, blinding inequalities,

poverty, economic, cultural and moral alienation, our tumultuous lands offer us exemplary material to reveal in fictions, in a direct or indirect way, through facts, dreams, testimonies, allegories, nightmares or visions that reality is imperfectly made, that life must change. But within ten, twenty or fifty years, the hour of social justice will arrive in our countries, as it has in Cuba, and the whole of Latin America will have freed itself from the order that despoils it, from the castes that exploit it, from the forces that now insult and repress it.¹⁹

Unlike other writers whose socialist convictions surfaced only with the triumph of the Cuban revolution, Vargas Llosa was a firm believer in socialism before he pledged his support to Fidel Castro. Years before the 1959 revolution, Vargas Llosa had expressed his commitment to the goals and ideals of José Carlos Mariátegui, the founder of the Peruvian Communist Party, widely considered the first Latin American Marxist thinker.

MARIÁTEGUI, ARGUEDAS AND SALAZAR BONDY

In one of his first literary essays, published in 1956, Vargas Llosa approvingly summarized the main thesis of Mariátegui's *Seven Interpretive Essays on Peruvian Reality* (1928), the first and most influential book to analyze Peruvian society in Marxist terms:

The vision of Peru that emerges from the *Seven Interpretive Essays on Peruvian Reality* is based on an objective, direct observation of its problems. . . . On the one hand there is an authentic, native Peru originating directly in the pre-Hispanic epoch: the Indian Peru that flourished in the Andes. On the other, there is an inauthentic Peru that came into being with the arrival of the Spaniards who settled on the Pacific coast and whose ethnic, cultural, political and economic elements are foreign, and stand in contradiction to the Andean Peru. . . . The Indian problem has only one solution: the elimination of the *latifundio* [large landed estate that depends on an indigenous work force]. . . . The Indian has heroically resisted every effort to eliminate the custom of communal labor for which he has a natural propensity. Thus, to reclaim the rights of the indigenous class [in Peru], a collective and socialist system for working the land must be reestablished.²⁰

According to Mariátegui the descendants of Europeans in Peru have ignored the country's true heritage and have produced a national history and literature that avoids the history of Indian exploitation and disregards the Indian's rights to recover the land usurped by the Spaniards during the conquest of America. Contemporary Peruvian writers, according to Mariátegui, have the duty to portray the Indians' problems. He coined the term *indigenismo* to describe a literature that attempts to depict Indian reality in order to help reclaim the Indian's political rights. Peruvian literature, in this view, must first and foremost explore the spiritual, political, and economic reality of the Indian.

The most influential figure of literary *indigenismo* was José María Arguedas (1911–1969) who, inspired by Mariátegui, attempted to document the social and spiritual reality of the Andean world. His literary works were also intended to contribute to the establishment of socialism in Peru by underscoring the connections between pre-Columbian collectivism and modern Communism, and by depicting the transition from Indian exploitation to Indian revolt and even to revolutionary action.

Vargas Llosa admired Arguedas and over the years has made important efforts in disseminating his work outside Peru. In a 1955 article, his first published journalistic essay on a Latin American novelist, Vargas Llosa praised Arguedas's project of revealing the true reality of the Indian for the first time in Peruvian literature, and he pointed to the "primarily constructive and social purpose behind his literary work."²¹ Notwithstanding his lavish praise for Arguedas here and elsewhere, Vargas Llosa felt uneasy about Mariátegui's claim that Peruvian literature's most significant task was to explore Indian reality. He never felt comfortable with the project to which Arguedas dedicated his life: the reclaiming of Andean civilization as the main foundation for a future national culture.²² Indeed, Vargas Llosa's main objection to the *Seven Interpretive Essays on Peruvian Reality* involves the point on which Arguedas most agreed with Mariátegui, that is, his insistence that Peruvian national literature must address the Indian question:

[The paragraphs Mariátegui dedicated to] predict the future of Peruvian literature were unfortunate: he claimed that *indigenismo* was destined to improve and to become representative. Today we know that it was merely a frail and artificial experiment.²³

Vargas Llosa reconciled his distaste for *indigenismo* with his admiration for Arguedas by stressing that *indigenismo* was a failed genre but that Arguedas was nonetheless a great writer able to portray the Andean world in his literary works.²⁴