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978-0-521-86424-4 - The Cambridge Companion to Mario Vargas Llosa

Edited by Efraín Kristal and John King

Excerpt

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EFRAÍN KRISTAL AND JOHN KING

## Introduction

Best known as one of the major novelists of the last five decades, Mario Vargas Llosa (b. 1936, Arequipa, Peru) is also one of Latin America's leading public intellectuals, a critic of art and culture, and a playwright of distinction. Vargas Llosa came to prominence in the 1960s as a talented short-story writer and a masterful practitioner of the novel. His early novels were considered innovative from a technical standpoint, and politically engaged. He was concerned with the theme of corruption and its effects on individuals and communities, and he found a literary means to express it: the crossing of spatial and temporal planes. In the 1970s he reconsidered his admiration for the Cuban Revolution and other leftist causes, and reoriented both his literary and his cultural concerns in line with anti-authoritarian democratic free market liberalism. In his novels of the period he adds humour, irony and a new kind of literary complexity to his repertoire and becomes interested in the theme of fanaticism, and his new literary technique involves alternating between a realistic register and one that is clearly imaginary, based on dreams and fantasies. After his unsuccessful bid to become president of Peru in 1990, Vargas Llosa returned to literature with a more circumspect view of political action. With *The Feast of the Goat* (2000),<sup>1</sup> he finds a synthesis between the theme of corruption and the theme of fanaticism, and begins to develop a new literary procedure, which informs *The Way to Paradise* (2003), *The Bad Girl* (2006) and *The Dream of the Celt* (2010): the creation of a literary register that can be read simultaneously in a realistic register or as a fantasy. This mixing of registers is a form that is appropriate to conveying his new theme: reconciliation.

In Vargas Llosa's literary world some characters make appearances in several works. Lituma, for example, appears in the early short stories, in *The Green House* (1966), in *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* (1977), in *La Chunga* (1986), in *Who Killed Palomino Molero?* (1986) and in *Death in the Andes* (1993); Chispas in *The Cubs* (1967), *Conversation in The Cathedral* (1969) and *Al pie del Támesis* ('On the banks of the Thames', 2008); Fonchito in *In Praise of the Stepmother* (1988), *The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto* (1997) and the children's tale *Fonchito y la luna* ('Fonchito and the moon', 2010). Vargas

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Llosa's fictional world, however, is not a seamless whole. Vargas Llosa is a writer who has reinvented himself several times during his literary trajectory, and the reappearance of characters suggests corrections and modifications more often than continuities.

This being said, there is a common thread that runs through Vargas Llosa's work. He has always wrestled with the proposition that the hopes and desires of human beings invariably surpass their ability to fulfil them. Vargas Llosa's characters experience – viscerally or intuitively – what he has eloquently spelled out in his essays: that something may be painfully wrong with society or with the world as they find it; that something might not be quite right with the way human beings are wired or equipped to cope with the challenges of life; that there are irrational, destructive forces, within us or out there, against which we may have to struggle. Although we might be able to keep these forces at bay, we will never tame them altogether when they are unleashed, at least not in the kingdom of this world. Vargas Llosa's sustained exploration of the incompatibilities between experience and the imagination may well be his most enduring contribution to literature.

Mario Vargas Llosa is both a master of modernist narrative techniques and a consummate storyteller. Unlike Gabriel García Márquez – his only rival in the history of the Spanish American novel – he does not dazzle his readers with the power of a wild imagination and an equally extraordinary mastery of narrative time, to create a sense of wonder grounded in everyday social and political realities of common and uncommon people. Instead, Vargas Llosa is a novelist able to persuade his readers, from the very first line of any of his narratives, that they are being told a story of considerable human interest. García Márquez's literary conceits involve elements of surprise in narratives that move forward according to a lived experience; or backwards to accommodate the memories of individuals or collectives, including the memories stored in the popular imagination. Plot, for García Márquez, is secondary to genealogy, or to the vicissitudes and accidents of the lives of individuals and communities. For Vargas Llosa, on the other hand, plot is fundamental, and all of his narratives take the reader on a journey with an endpoint that often requires an epilogue on the significance of the concatenation of events.<sup>2</sup> From a technical point of view, even his most sophisticated novels, as Gerald Martin demonstrates in his analysis of *The Green House* depend on interconnected plots: Vargas Llosa's protagonists face challenges, encounter characters who will change the course of their lives, and play out situations until the game is fully over. These stories can sometimes be grounded in the intimacy of a bourgeois home, as in the novels that Roy Boland analyses in his chapter on Vargas Llosa's erotic novels; or in the heat of revolutionary activity, as Deborah Cohn explores in her chapter on the novels set in the Andes; or across large historical canvases, as in *The War of the End of the*

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[More information](#)

## Introduction

*World* (1981). This, the only Latin American historical novel meaningfully comparable to Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, is analysed here by Juan de Castro and Nicholas Birns, with a keen awareness of the political and ideological ramifications of the time the novel was written. But whatever the setting, Vargas Llosa's novels are invariably grounded in plot, and he manages to make his stories gripping even when he uses some of the most complex narrative techniques in contemporary literature. Vargas Llosa thinks of his characters, not in terms of their lives as they unfold, but in terms of the circumstances in which situations are played out. This is probably why he preferred the dramatic plots of Joanot Martorell's chivalric romance *Tirant lo Blanc*, to the episodic nature of the Spanish picaresque novel, or even *Don Quixote*. Character in Vargas Llosa's novels is revealed in situations; and one of the most remarkable aspects of his literary craft – the one most likely to get lost in translation – is his uncanny ability to suggest nuances of the spoken voice through the written word. In his creative process, as he explains in the interview that is included as the last chapter of this volume, he likes to read his work in progress aloud: this observation offers an insight about the significance of speech in his writing.

In Vargas Llosa's literary world, unhappiness and suffering are as pervasive as the two responses with which his unsettled literary characters strive to prevail over their feelings of malaise: rebellion and fantasy. Rebellion and fantasy are also responses to the uses and abuses of power. In his chapter, Alonso Cueto explores the central themes of rebellion, fantasy and power across the spectrum of novels. In the 1960s – when Vargas Llosa was a committed socialist – he expressed his discontent with the world as he had found it with an underlying sense of optimism. He was persuaded that human dissatisfaction in Latin America was directly linked to the shortcomings of social and economic realities, to the corruption and injustices revolutionary action would remedy. As he was writing his first novels, inspired by Jean-Paul Sartre's conviction that engaged literature can contribute to the political transformation of society, Vargas Llosa harboured the strong hope that his native Peru, and the rest of Latin America, would soon follow Fidel Castro's Cuba as the flagship for true liberty and justice.

Vargas Llosa became an immediate literary sensation for his masterful depiction of the corrosive effects of political corruption on human hopes and aspirations in *The Time of the Hero* (1963), *The Green House*, and *Conversation in The Cathedral*. In these three novels – as the chapters on the early novels by Gerald Martin and Efraín Kristal reveal – the Peruvian novelist demonstrated his ability to master the techniques of James Joyce and William Faulkner with rigour, and to take these literary procedures to new heights. Vargas Llosa added layers of density to his descriptions through interior monologues, and

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[More information](#)

EFRAÍN KRISTAL AND JOHN KING

experimented with spatial and temporal planes, creating resonances and dissonances between events and conversations taking place in different times and places. He developed an indirect form of discourse in which the voice of an impersonal narrator can readily express a character's intimate thoughts, using ambiguity and ellipses to enhance the effect. These modernist techniques appear in the novels with a heightened sense of intrigue that embraces the tropes and conceits of adventure stories, of popular culture, and even the plots of the highly sentimental and melodramatic Mexican cinema of the 1940s and 1950s, which is only one example of the formal and thematic significance of film in Vargas Llosa's novels.

The early novels were critically acclaimed and commercially successful, and Vargas Llosa was eager to lend his considerable popularity and international prestige to the Cuban Revolution. 'Literature is Fire', his 1967 acceptance speech for the prestigious Rómulo Gallegos Prize in Venezuela, was the most important literary manifesto of the new Latin American novel of the 1960s. In it, he established firm connections between the kind of novel he was writing, along with Gabriel García Márquez, Carlos Fuentes and others, and their shared political ideals. These writers had much in common, including a deep admiration for the exacting standards of Jorge Luis Borges's narrative fiction, even though they could not find any political ideas worth recommending in the writings of the Argentine master.

Vargas Llosa's own disenchantment with the Cuban Revolution, and with the Latin American left, was slow and painful, as John King highlights in his chapter on the essays. The article Vargas Llosa wrote in 1968 to express his criticism of Fidel Castro for recanting his initial condemnation of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia was his first public criticism of the Cuban regime. It was followed by his denunciations of censorship and human rights violations in both Cuba and the Soviet Union. The backlash against Vargas Llosa for the views he had expressed disabused him of the idea that he had earned the right to criticise the Cuban Revolution, even though he had thought of himself as a committed ally of the regime, with the right to do so. His ostracism by his former Cuban friends made him circumspect about Castro's regime, but not about his own socialist convictions, which he held for several more years. He found himself in an awkward situation, having become a world celebrity with novels he thought were contributing to socialist causes, but considered an outcast by the Latin American left and by most professional academic specialists of Latin American literature in the 1970s, who agreed that they had overestimated the significance of Vargas Llosa's contribution to literature, or at least of Vargas Llosa as a writer who fulfilled their political expectations.

The impact of this confusing and tumultuous time on his writing was immediate. As he was distancing himself from the Cuban regime, he also began to take a

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[More information](#)

## Introduction

step back from the sombre themes of his first novels, recasting them with humour, as Michael Wood shows, in *Captain Pantoja and the Special Service* (1973). With *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* he toned down the high-pitched modernist techniques that characterised his first novels, and began developing a new literary approach to explore the gap between the hopes and aspirations of his characters by alternating between two literary registers: a realistic register in which the prosaic experiences of his characters' lives alternate with another register, which is clearly informed by their compensatory fantasies. He also began to explore the theme that would dominate his narrative literature for a decade to come: the fanatic with fixed ideas, unable to see reality for what it is. In some cases, Vargas Llosa's fanatics are willing to use violence against those they consider to be obstacles to their impossible, utopian aspirations.

By the 1980s, Vargas Llosa fully abandoned his socialist convictions and became an outspoken advocate of free market democracy. His political allegiances had now shifted from Fidel Castro to Margaret Thatcher, and his enthusiasm for Sartre faded as he embraced a line of thinking (Albert Camus, Karl Popper, Isaiah Berlin, Friedrich Von Hayek) according to which the notion of a perfect human being or a realisable utopia is not only a fantasy, but the source of unnecessary violence and strife. Even though he has always been a bitter enemy of dictators and dictatorships, his political shift away from the Latin American left in particular, and utopian thinking in general, consolidated his break with the left, as it gained him new friends among Latin American entrepreneurs and liberal intellectuals.

Vargas Llosa would no longer claim that violence was a legitimate means to achieve the kind of political change that would eliminate the fundamental causes of human discontent. In fact, he began to make the case that some of the sources of political violence and instability could be traced to the notion that social utopias are possible. His novels in the 1980s – mapped by Juan de Castro and Nicholas Birns, Fiona J. Mackintosh and Deborah Cohn – were concerned with the fragility of a society assailed by religious and military fanatics, political opportunists or well-intentioned dreamers and idealists, who encounter the human propensity to idealise violence or to cynically profit from corruption or violent situations. At the time, Vargas Llosa remained optimistic that the propensities to unrest and instability generated by unhappy individuals could be effectively diffused. He thought that the literary imagination could combine elements from the realities of their imperfect lives with their most irrational drives, to give them the illusion of a fulfilment they could never achieve in the real world. This play between fiction and reality is also at the heart of his plays written in the 1980s and later, as Evelyn Fishburn shows. Furthermore, Vargas Llosa considered that the utopian thinking of the Latin American left, together with the authoritarianism of the Latin American right

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

EFRAÍN KRISTAL AND JOHN KING

and a long history of corruption, were the major impediments to the establishment of the kind of free market economy that he argued could reduce misery and generate prosperity in Latin America.

Vargas Llosa ran for the Peruvian presidency in 1990, with the expectation that he could make a difference to his nation. After his unsuccessful bid, a less optimistic vision has informed his writings – fictional and non-fictional alike – imparting a growing sense that all struggles to prevail over our intractable feelings of discomfort are doomed to failure.

When Vargas Llosa began his literary career, he would refer to the ‘demons’ of literary creation as a metaphor for the irrational motivations that drive writers of narrative fiction to create alternative realities, and he spoke of the writer as a deicide who sought to usurp the creation of God through the creation of an alternative reality – a reality that would challenge the ‘real’ world. As his socialist convictions waned, he spoke of an allegorical struggle between demons and angels, referring to the tension between the forces that undermine social existence, and the compensatory activities, such as literature and the erotic, that counterbalance the inherent insufficiencies of life. Entering a third and more pessimistic period, the demons are no longer just metaphors, but rather begin to signal the presence of intractable evil. So, while literature can still attain great heights, these heights also offer a sober indication that the world in which we live is inherently unsatisfactory. Vargas Llosa’s pessimism about our abilities to overcome our demons has given rise to a more conciliatory, understanding attitude towards his former enemies and rivals in both the literary and political spheres, and his own past. In his most recent work, *The Dream of the Celt*, Vargas Llosa explores the friendship formed between a strict heterosexual guard and a gay human rights activist, to propose that love comes from the acceptance of, rather than the refusal to acknowledge, a traumatic past. Even though he has been writing novels for some fifty years, his ideas have continually developed with restless energy. Vargas Llosa’s pessimism in our abilities to overcome our demons has given rise to a new outlook, which informs his most recent novels, *The Way to Paradise*, *The Bad Girl* and *The Dream of the Celt*.

The *Cambridge Companion to Mario Vargas Llosa* concentrates on his vast output of narrative fiction, but it also maps out connections between his concerns as a creative writer and his rich career as a cultural and political figure. The *Companion* opens with an introductory essay by Alonso Cueto, which offers an overview of Vargas Llosa’s major literary themes in the context of his personal and intellectual biography. Cueto is a highly regarded Peruvian novelist, but he is also a university professor who has written extensively on Vargas Llosa, and has edited several books about his compatriot. His essay is scholarly, but it also offers personal aperçus into Vargas

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

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Llosa's life and literary experiences. The next nine chapters cover all of Vargas Llosa's narrative fiction. Chapter 2, by Gerald Martin, focuses on *The Time of the Hero* and *The Green House*, the novels that secured Vargas Llosa's place as a major figure in world literature, and it also addresses the first short stories. Chapter 3, by Efraín Kristal, is devoted to *Conversation in The Cathedral*, one of the great political novels in the Latin American literary canon, and on *The Cubs*, a short novel that shares some of the characters and one of the major themes of the longer novel. In Chapter 4, Michael Wood explores two novels of a transitional period in which Vargas Llosa offered ironic, humorous takes on his previous themes, while beginning to explore new directions. Chapter 5, by Juan de Castro and Nicholas Birns, is devoted to *The War of the End of the World*, a historical novel on the grand scale set in Brazil, and arguably Vargas Llosa's most ambitious work of literature. In Chapter 6, Fiona J. Mackintosh analyses two shorter novels in which Vargas Llosa addresses his concerns about the dynamics between the indigenous and non-indigenous worlds in Latin America, and about a gruesome crime of passion that takes place near a military base. Chapter 7, by Deborah Cohn, offers an analysis of two novels set in the Andes. Both are literary explorations of political violence in revolutionary contexts. Chapter 8, by Roy Boland, groups together Vargas Llosa's two erotic novels, which both feature Don Rigoberto, a man whose private erotic life threatens the stability of his public life as a respectable businessman. In Chapter 9, Clive Griffin offers a sustained analysis of *The Feast of the Goat*, Vargas Llosa's only novel about a dictator, and his second novel set outside Peru. In Chapter 10, Efraín Kristal shows that Vargas Llosa's last three novels amount to a new direction in Vargas Llosa's literary trajectory, one in which his former critique of fanaticism and political utopias has shifted to an exploration of human reconciliation. The final four chapters move from the novels to other aspects of Vargas Llosa's literary production. Chapter 11, by John King, offers an overview of Vargas Llosa's essays, focusing on the vicissitudes of his trajectory, giving pride of place to his writings on politics, literature and the visual arts. The chapter is followed by the reproduction pages from one of Vargas Llosa's working notebooks, with his preparatory notes for a course on the Latin American novel he taught at Columbia University from October 1975 to January 1976. The document illustrates Vargas Llosa's thoughts on the Latin American novel at a crossroads in his own literary trajectory: it offers insights into the sense of his own contributions to Latin American literary history, it summarises some of the concerns of his early works and anticipates future projects to come, including his interest in *Rebellion in the Backlands* by Euclides da Cunha, the book that generated his interest in the episode of Brazilian history that inspired *The War of the End of the World*. Chapter 12, by Kelly Austin, analyses Vargas

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[More information](#)

EFRAÍN KRISTAL AND JOHN KING

Llosa's *A Fish in the Water* (1993), the memoir of his failed presidential campaign, focusing on the tensions between a literary and a political life, and also explores the ways in which fiction enters into Vargas Llosa's autobiographical prose. Chapter 13, by Evelyn Fishburn, offers a detailed analysis of Vargas Llosa's plays, and Chapter 14, by Carolina Sitnisky, explores the use of cinematic techniques in Vargas Llosa's work, and looks at the ways that the novels have been adapted to the screen. The volume concludes with an interview in which the editors invite Vargas Llosa to reflect on aspects of his trajectory as a creative writer, paying special attention to the novels of the last decade.

NOTES

1. Publication dates are given for the first edition of the Spanish text unless otherwise stated.
2. In a subtle and nuanced analysis, Perry Anderson shows that differences in literary style also have a bearing on the divergent ways in which Gabriel García Márquez and Mario Vargas Llosa have addressed their political convictions in their autobiographical writings. Perry Anderson, 'Tropical Recall: Gabriel García Márquez'. In Perry Anderson. *Spectrum: From Right to Left in the World of Ideas*. London: Verso, 2005, pp. 210–19.



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[More information](#)

## I

ALONSO CUETO

## Reality and rebellion

An overview of Mario Vargas Llosa's literary themes

## A life in movement

The house where Vargas Llosa was born, on 28 March 1936, has wooden railings, a small front garden and a door flanked by white columns. Relatively close to Arequipa's Plaza de Armas, at Boulevard Parra 101, its façade looks today much as it did eight decades ago. Mario lived there with his grandparents, Don Pedro Llosa and Doña Carmen Ureta; and his mother, Dora, went to church from that home on her wedding day.

Vargas Llosa, however, was too young to have a conscious recollection of his first home. He was only a year old when the Llosa clan, led by his maternal grandfather, moved to Cochabamba in Bolivia, where he would live for the next nine years. In 1946 he returned to Peru to study at the La Salle school in Piura, a city in the northern coastal area of Peru where he would set the brothel that gave the title to his second novel, published in 1966, *The Green House* (*La casa verde*<sup>1</sup>). In 1947 he would go to Lima, and become a cadet in the military academy he would immortalise in his first novel in 1963, *The Time of the Hero* (*La ciudad y los perros*<sup>2</sup>). He returned to Piura in 1952, and moved back to Lima the following year to begin his university studies, a period that inspired the literary world of *Conversation in The Cathedral* (*Conversación en La Catedral*<sup>3</sup>).

Arequipa, Cochabamba, Piura, Lima: by the time he was sixteen years old, he had moved six times and had lived in two countries and four different cities. When Vargas Llosa was eleven years old, he learned of the existence of his father, whom his family had led him to believe was dead since he was a little boy. Until then he had idealised his father from a photo in which he appeared, friendly and smiling, in a sailor's cap. The authoritarian, irascible man who came into his life was a stark contrast to Mario's fantasies of a caring father he had lost as a little boy.

The intrusion of the stern and sometimes brutal man on Mario's bitter-sweet fantasy of a loving father was the first compelling evidence, in his own

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## ALONSO CUETO

life, of the chasm that can arise between a fictional world and the real one. He felt as if the outside world had come crashing into his life.

Expelled from the cosy protection of his maternal family, Vargas Llosa's life became an adventure of exile and reunion, loss and discovery. Reading novels came to be an antidote to an unacceptable reality in which his father ruled over him and his mother. Vargas Llosa's literary life began with his need to compensate for a difficult reality through fantasy. In one way or another, his attempt to recover a world of dreams through literature is also an attempt to return to a lost childhood, which was also the product of his illusions; he can only return to the idealised world of his childhood, before the arrival of his father, through the novels that he reads and those that he will write.

The wanderings of his childhood are the first indication of the itinerant life he would have to the present day. From a very young age, he has been an instinctive nomad, moving from one place to another in order to cope with life. He has lived in countless cities and, even today, the only constant in his life is travel. The other distinctive inheritance from his childhood is his ethical perception of the world. Raised in a Catholic family, and influenced by his mother, aunts and uncles, he adopts a moral vision of reality. Moral evaluation will become a natural, instinctive impulse in his own life and the lives of the protagonists of his literary works. His dictators will be morally repugnant characters, and his heroes will act according to an emotional response stirred by their moral judgements. Notions of sin and punishment are ever present in his literary world. His attachment to novels of chivalry, and identification with the codes of honour and battle that inform them, is hardly surprising.

Vargas Llosa is a novelist by nature, perhaps because the novel is a motley, mercurial genre, the one most open to diversity and porous to other genres. Yet he has written numerous and notable essays (he is one of the best prose writers in the Spanish language); occasional articles on an impressive variety of subjects (including soccer and opera); major books of literary criticism; and a significant number of plays. He also embarked on an adventure reserved for individuals susceptible to taking on a considerable amount of risk when he became a candidate for the presidency of Peru. As a journalist, he reported on the situation in Iraq in the midst of occupation, and on the plight of the Palestinian people in the occupied territories. He is interested, even fascinated, by dangerous challenges of this kind because he needs to explore and test the limits of reality. This personal propensity carries through to his literary work, in which more intense forms of danger and risk serve as touchstones that reveal the identity of his characters.