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A COMPANION TO
MARIO VARGAS LLOSA

TAMESIS

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PREFACE

The Nobel Prize in Literature 2010 for Mario Vargas Llosa was the culmination of a long and illustrious career, in the course of which he has become famous for his novels, but also notorious for his (often polemical) participation in intellectual and political debates. Both areas of his writing, fiction as well as essays and journalism, are ongoing endeavours which he pursues with the same vigour today as he did fifty years ago. The aim of this book is to provide readers with an overview and a general evaluation of Vargas Llosa's large body of work, and to discuss the contradictory reactions which he provokes.

This *Companion* differs from the approach of other introductions to Vargas Llosa which divide his work into different phases, corresponding to the changes in his political opinion. It challenges the received opinion about his notorious development: supposedly from a youthful Marxist writer, supporter of the Cuban revolution, who wanted literature to play a part in radical social change, to a liberal, right-wing propagandist of free-market politics who, nonetheless, continues to produce great literature that manages to transcend his political opinions. By contrast, this book highlights the many continuities in his long writing career: within his fiction, it follows recurring themes, formal features and patterns of language – three main factors, according to Vargas Llosa's theory, in transforming reality into fiction. In terms of literature's role in society it shows the continuity between his famous early statement that 'literature is fire' and the importance he ascribes to fiction in his Nobel Lecture, as a rebellious force encouraging a critical, nonconformist spirit.

The first part of this book discusses Vargas Llosa's literary theory and criticism as it has developed over the years. This is complemented by a survey of his political essays and journalism, highlighting his conception of the dual role of writer and intellectual.

The main part focuses on the fictional work. Combining a roughly chronological treatment with a thematic approach, it gives prominence to Vargas Llosa's narrative work. His short stories of 1959 already contain many of the characteristics that would later become a trademark of his fiction. Formal experimenting emerges as one of the common features of his earlier novels in which he developed narrative techniques influenced by, amongst others, Flaubert and Faulkner. At the same time, he experimented with language,

trying to find a way of reproducing the slang of youth gangs, the jargon of the military, popular language, and the melodrama of radio serials.

An important point in Vargas Llosa's approach to literature is his ambition to encompass the complexity of reality in a work of fiction. A highlight in his quest for the 'total novel' is the 1981 *La guerra del fin del mundo* [*The War of the End of the World*] which successfully combines technical and structural complexity with a way of telling a story that can be read on many different levels: as an adventure story, a historical novel, but also as a political novel integrating his strong anti-ideological convictions into an immensely rich narrative.

After this central masterpiece, the focus of Vargas Llosa's fiction shifted to experimenting with different genres: erotic fiction, thrillers, writing about art (ekphrasis), a reworking of Greek myths, metafiction, and not least the memoirs that his political interlude engendered. The study highlights common themes that run through this very diverse body of work, giving it unity and coherence: authoritarianism, machismo, the father, the outsider, the relationship between reality and fiction, and the role of storytelling, to name just a few.

The last chapter devoted to Vargas Llosa's narrative work demonstrates how *La Fiesta del Chivo* [*The Feast of the Goat*] of 2000 picked up a number of these diverse strands and reunited them with the totalizing ambition of his earlier novels. The analysis of this great dictatorship novel and of the novels that have followed it more recently, *El Paraíso en la otra esquina* [*The Way to Paradise*] (2003) and *El sueño del celta* [*The Dream of the Celt*] (2010), reveals the extent of continuity and coherence in Vargas Llosa's more than fifty years of writing.

In the third and final part of the book, a look at his theatrical work shows how Vargas Llosa transposes the topics that mark his narrative work to a different medium. This includes the ambiguities of reality and fiction which he explores on the stage, in recent years even as an actor himself.

Suggestions for further reading complement this comprehensive overview of Mario Vargas Llosa's work, which is aimed at enabling undergraduate and graduate students to evaluate the differing reactions to this by now canonic, but nonetheless controversial Hispanic author. For the general reader interested in the Nobel Prize winner this book provides an introduction to his complex and fascinating fictional universe, giving an idea of its unity, while adding essential information about his intellectual and political background.

Wherever possible I have used published English translations of quotations; the others are mine. The dates given for Vargas Llosa's works in the text of this study refer to the year of their first publication and correspond to the bibliography at the end of this book, listing his works in chronological order of publication. But the page numbers of quotations in my text refer to the editions I have actually used, which are referenced in the footnotes.

INTRODUCTION

The Peruvian author Mario Vargas Llosa is one of the major Latin American literary figures of the last five decades. A prolific writer, he has so far published sixteen novels,¹ some shorter narrative works, eight plays, a children's book, five major critical studies of other writers, and a large number of essay collections concerning literature, politics and wider social and intellectual issues, many of which derive from the journalistic work that he has always pursued in parallel with his fictional writing. From the beginning of his career, literature and politics were two sides of his vocation as a writer that have coexisted and influenced each other.

Born in the Peruvian town of Arequipa on 28 March 1936, Mario Vargas Llosa spent a happy early childhood with his mother and her family in Cochabamba, Bolivia, where he learnt to read and write. Encouraged by his maternal family, he developed a passion for literature which would determine his whole life. He found that the 'magic' of fictions opened up worlds, allowing him to 'break the barriers of time and space' and to turn 'dreams into life and life into dreams'.² Although writing stories proved to be a difficult undertaking which required discipline, patience and lots of reading and imitating the great masters, he found it a delightful occupation. It was not until unhappiness disrupted his existence that reading and writing became a necessity, providing refuge and relief from the shock of his father, whom he had believed to be dead, re-entering his peaceful life. Mario was eleven years old and living in Piura when his mother revealed to him that his father was, in fact, alive and that they would move to Lima to live with him. In his Nobel Lecture Vargas Llosa describes how, from that moment onwards, literature became his 'reason for living' ('mi razón de vivir'):

¹ During the final proof-correcting stage of this book, Vargas Llosa's seventeenth novel was published: *El héroe discreto* [The Discreet Hero] (Madrid: Alfaguara, 2013). Set in contemporary Peru it alternates between two stories, with some familiar protagonists such as Lituma, Don Rigoberto with his wife Lucrecia and son Fonchito.

² Mario Vargas Llosa, 'In Praise of Reading and Fiction', Nobel Lecture, 7 December 2010, <http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2010/vargas_llosa-lecture_en.html> [accessed 27 October 2012]. There is also a printed version of this text: *In Praise of Reading and Fiction. The Nobel Lecture*, trans. Edith Grossman (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011). I continue to quote from the online version.

Perdí la inocencia y descubrí la soledad, la autoridad, la vida adulta y el miedo. Mi salvación fue leer, leer los buenos libros, refugiarme en esos mundos donde vivir era exaltante [*sic*], intenso, una aventura tras otra, donde podía sentirme libre y volvía a ser feliz. Y fue escribir, a escondidas, como quien se entrega a un vicio inconfesable, a una pasión prohibida. La literatura dejó de ser un juego. Se volvió una manera de resistir la adversidad, de protestar, de rebelarme, de escapar a lo intolerable.³

[I lost my innocence and discovered loneliness, authority, adult life, and fear. My salvation was reading, reading good books, taking refuge in those worlds where life was glorious, intense, one adventure after another, where I could feel free and be happy again. And it was writing, in secret, like someone giving himself up to an unspeakable vice, a forbidden passion. Literature stopped being a game. It became a way of resisting adversity, protesting, rebelling, escaping the intolerable.]⁴

The father intended to disrupt, even cure his son Mario's unmanly passion for literature by sending him to the Leoncio Prado Military Academy. All he achieved was widening his son's knowledge of Peruvian society, raising his social awareness and providing him with the material for his first novel which, years later, would catapult him onto the international literary scene.

In 1952 Mario Vargas Llosa returned to Piura where, during his final year at school, he was able to direct his first – unpublished – play, *La huida del inca* [The Inca's Escape], in a performance at the local theatre. Back in Lima, the rebellion against his father continued with his refusal to study at the conservative Catholic university, preferring to enrol at the much more politicized National University of San Marcos, where he joined a clandestine Marxist group called Cahuide. That, too, provided material for a novel – *Conversación en la catedral* [*Conversation in the Cathedral*]⁵ – as did his experiences as a journalist for newspapers and the radio. At the age of 18 he took the rebellious decision to marry his aunt Julia, a divorcee ten years older than him, and in 1959 he left for Europe on a scholarship to complete a doctorate at the Complutense University in Madrid. The following year the couple moved to Paris – a dream come true for the aspiring writer and lover of French literature and culture. Despite the financial necessity of juggling several odd jobs Vargas Llosa managed to have a collection of short stories

³ Mario Vargas Llosa, 'Elogio de la lectura y la ficción', Nobel Lecture, 7 December 2010, <http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2010/vargas_llosa-lecture_sp.html> [accessed 27 October 2012].

⁴ Vargas Llosa, 'In Praise of Reading and Fiction'.

⁵ Mario Vargas Llosa, *Conversación en la catedral* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1985); Mario Vargas Llosa, *Conversation in the Cathedral*, trans. Gregory Rabassa (New York: HarperCollins, 2005).

published – *Los jefes* [The Leaders] (1959)⁶ – while working on his first novel. Against all odds, he had turned himself into a professional writer. He later divorced Julia Urquidi and married his cousin Patricia Llosa who has accompanied – and managed – his life of writing ever since.

When, in 1962, the 26-year-old's *La ciudad y los perros* [*The Time of the Hero*]⁷ became the first Latin American novel to win the Biblioteca Breve prize awarded by the Spanish publishing house Seix Barral, it helped to spark the so-called Boom of Spanish American fiction. A much-debated phenomenon, the Boom owes its name to the fact that, during the 1960s, a number of innovative novels by Latin American writers appeared in quick succession, bursting into the consciousness of a Western reading public due to their publication or distribution, promotion and quick translation in Europe. The most influential writers of the Boom were the so-called Big Four: the Argentinian Julio Cortázar, the Mexican Carlos Fuentes, the Colombian Gabriel García Márquez, and Vargas Llosa, the youngest of the four. Living and working outside their native countries, and meeting frequently in the stimulating intellectual atmosphere of Paris, Barcelona or other European cities, they developed a common Latin American identity across national borders which replaced the regional outlook of previous generations of writers from Spanish America. A wider perspective went hand in hand with a wider aesthetic: instead of traditional realism the Boom authors adopted experimental techniques able to reflect the complex and ambiguous relationship between fiction and reality.

An important extraliterary factor in uniting this group of writers during the 1960s was their enthusiastic support for the Cuban Revolution which had made culture an important part of its political strategy. Between 1965 and 1971 Vargas Llosa was involved with the Cuban cultural institute *Casa de las Américas*, served on the board of its journal and was a juror for the literary prize of the same name. This political dimension of the Boom appealed to Western readers who followed the Cuban socialist experiment with sympathy and fascination. The link between literature and politics contributed further to the success of Spanish American authors in those years and had a lasting effect on the reception of Latin American fiction. But the unifying power of the ideological consensus of the 1960s ended abruptly with the Padilla Affair in 1971. The Cuban poet Heberto Padilla was arrested for criticizing the Castro regime and forced to undergo a humiliating ritual of self-denunciation. A wave of protest against such Stalinist practices went through previously

⁶ Mario Vargas Llosa, *Los jefes* (Barcelona: Bruguera, 1983). The English translations of these short stories are included in Mario Vargas Llosa, *The Cubs and other Stories*, trans. Gregory Kolovakos and Ronald Christ (London: London: Faber and Faber, 1991).

⁷ Mario Vargas Llosa, *La ciudad y los perros* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1983); Mario Vargas Llosa, *The Time of the Hero* (London: Picador, 1986).