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# Mario Vargas Llosa on Love, Spectacle and Becoming a Legend

By DAVID STREITFELD APRIL 13, 2016



Mario Vargas Llosa at the Library of Congress earlier this week. Credit Lexey Swall for The New York Times

WASHINGTON — Four years ago, Mario Vargas Llosa wrote a book that said the world was going to hell. Journalists were sleaze-mongers and politicians hopeless. Civilization had collapsed into spectacle.

Then he became a spectacle himself when he left his wife of 50 years for another woman. Maybe that's not surprising. The Peruvian writer was a leading candidate for his country's presidency in 1990, is the last survivor of a literary movement that re-energized the novel in our time and is probably the only winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature to compare the joys of writing, in his 2010 Nobel lecture, to "making love to the woman you love, for days, weeks, months, without stopping."

The media, transfixed by his new romance, set about converting his private life into entertainment.

"I wrote that book" — it was published in English last summer as "Notes on the Death of Culture" — "and suddenly I became a kind of victim," Mr. Vargas Llosa said in an interview. "My private life was not private anymore. It was in magazines, in newspapers, all kinds of stupid gossip. I was defenseless against it. I am a living demonstration that what I wrote is true." He laughed, a deep rich rumble.

Mr. Vargas Llosa, who turned 80 last month, came here this week for a more benign form of spectacle, a prize ceremony. The author of the Tolstoyan epic “The War of the End of the World” and the comic romp “Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter,” among many other books, Mr. Vargas Llosa was the recipient of the Library of Congress’s Living Legend award. Created for the institution’s bicentennial in 2000, the award was initially given in abundance. This time around, only Mr. Vargas Llosa got it.

“Living, yes, I think I am living,” he told the crowd at the festivities on Monday night. “Not a legend.”

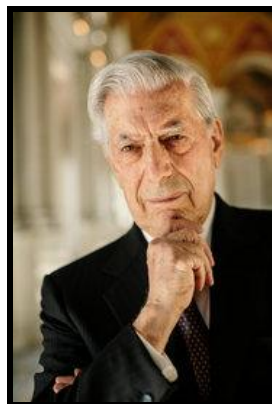
As part of the hoopla, there was a panel of scholars and another of novelists, including Jane Smiley and Thomas Mallon. Even as they wrestled with which novel by Mr. Vargas Llosa was the best, they generally agreed on his ability to borrow from popular culture to create art, his vast range of settings and styles — and his talent.

“When I was young,” the Peruvian novelist Alonso Cueto said, “I thought great novels could only take place in Paris or London or St. Petersburg.” Mr. Vargas Llosa’s “Conversation in the Cathedral,” a 1969 masterwork set in Lima, taught him otherwise.

Mr. Vargas Llosa set an example that went beyond the literary. Mr. Cueto recounted that when Abraham Valdelomar, a writer in the early 1900s, was asked to describe the first duty of a Peruvian writer, he responded: “Not to be destroyed.” Mr. Vargas Llosa, Mr. Cueto said, “became a model of discipline and sustained passion for all of us.”

In March, Mr. Vargas Llosa returned to the subject of journalism, this time in fictional form, with a thriller about reporters who are weapons of the state in a dictatorial Peru. “Cinco Esquinas” — named for a Lima neighborhood that translates somewhat dully as Five Corners, and so might be replaced when the English translation is issued in a year or so — explores the intersection of the erotic and the political.

After winning the first round of voting in 1990, Mr. Vargas Llosa lost in a landslide to the underdog Alberto Fujimori. That began a decade marked by corruption and human rights abuses. Mr. Fujimori is now in prison in Peru. (In a twist out of a bad novel, his daughter Keiko Fujimori won the first round of the presidential elections on Sunday.)



Mr. Vargas Llosa in Washington earlier this week. Credit Lexey Swall for The New York Times

“The journalists were used in a systematic way by the government to discredit critics by saying you were a homosexual, a pervert, a pedophile,” Mr. Vargas Llosa said in his fluent but idiosyncratic English. “And it was very effective. It terrorized people. No one wants to become the center of a scandal.”

But if the bedroom was dangerous, it was also a refuge.

“Sex had a kind a compensatory effect for many people,” he said. “They wanted to forget what was happening, this very painful kind of life where everyone was potentially a victim. You could die without knowing who was killing you — the terrorists, the government, police, common criminals.”

The cover of “Cinco Esquinas” shows two women in a rumpled bed, one reading a newspaper whose headline announces the country is under curfew. Carmen Balcells, Mr. Vargas Llosa’s literary agent, wondered when she read the manuscript if the book’s erotic content had been fueled by the author’s new relationship with Isabel Preysler, a 65-year-old model, former beauty queen and mother of the Spanish pop star Enrique Iglesias.

“None of your business, Carmen,” he said he told her, adding now: “She was curious, as everybody was. The public is anxious with an appetite.”

His motivations and emotions are obvious enough. He is smitten.

“What is essential in love is what the French call amour fou,” he said. “What is that in English? Crazy love? That doesn’t sound as beautiful. It’s a total kind of love that not only embraces feelings, actions, but a kind of understanding of the world from the perspective of love. This is something that moves mountains. It enriches people in incredible ways, gives you illusions, a kind of appetite for life.”

With the death of Gabriel García Márquez in 2014, Mr. Vargas Llosa is the last surviving member of the boom, that tight ensemble of writers who put Latin America on the literary map. “Most of my old friends, not only the writers ...” He trailed off, unwilling to say the word “dead.”

From Washington, Mr. Vargas Llosa will go on a monthlong lecture tour to the Dominican Republic, Chile, Argentina and Brazil. “I live on the plane,” he said. “I protest, but I think I enjoy it.”

This relentless activity keeps his biographer, Gerald Martin, busy. “I’m terrified of him,” Mr. Vargas Llosa said, “so I am trying to expand his work.”

(The plan is working. Mr. Martin, who won acclaim for his 2008 biography of Mr. García Márquez, said in an email from his home in England that he was in Lima at the end of last year; in Madrid last month for Mr. Vargas Llosa’s birthday festivities; and in Paris last week for the

publication of Mr. Vargas Llosa's works in the Pleiade classics series, a rare recognition for a living writer who is not even French. "I need," Mr. Martin writes, "to get back to writing the book.")

Last week, a Spanish press report rocketed around the world: Mr. Vargas Llosa was in the Panama Papers, which exposed tax havens and worse.

It was all a bureaucratic error, he maintains. "We didn't know the account existed," he said. "We never put one dollar in it."

The civilization of the spectacle has struck again.

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