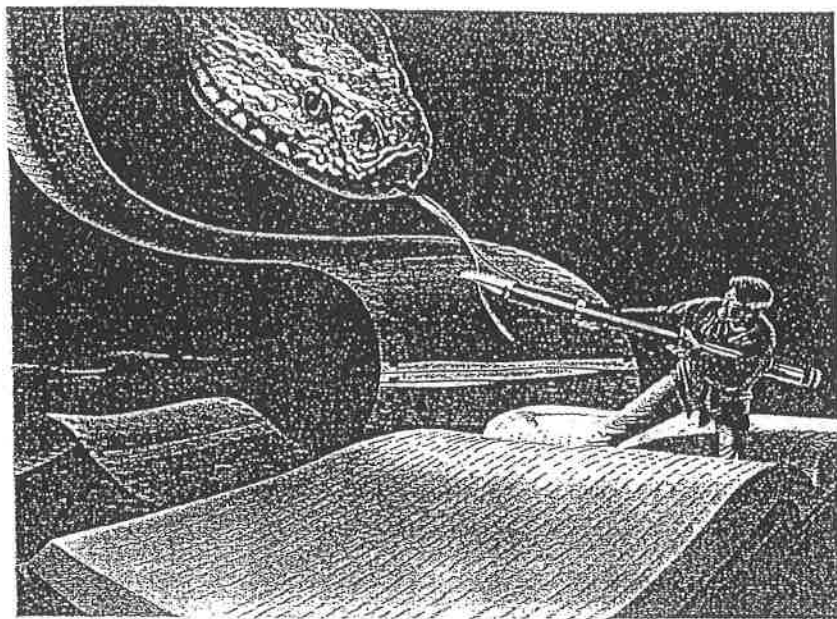


my best Shot



With Pens Drawn

MARCO VARGAS LLOSA

Literature should get dangerous again

My vocation as a writer grew out of the idea that literature does not exist in a closed artistic sphere but embraces a larger moral and civic universe. This is what has motivated everything I have written. It is also, alas, now turning me into a dinosaur in trousers, surrounded by computers.

Statistics tell us that never before have so many books been sold. The trouble is that hardly anybody I come across believes any longer that literature serves any great purpose beyond alleviating boredom on the bus or the underground, or has any higher ambition beyond being transformed into television or movie scripts. Literature has gone light. That's why critics such as George Steiner have come to believe literature is already dead, and why novelists such as V.S. Naipaul have come to proclaim that they will not

write another novel because the genre now fills them with disgust.

But amid this pessimism about literature, we should remember that many people still fear the writer. Look at the criminal clique that governs Nigeria and executed Ogoni author and activist Ken Saro-Wiwa after a trumped-up murder charge; at the imams who declared a *fatwa* on novelist Salman Rushdie for criticizing Islamic practices in *The Satanic Verses*; at the Muslim fundamentalists in Algeria who have cut the throats of dozens of journalists, writers, and thespians; and at all those regimes in North Korea, Cuba, China, Laos, Burma, and elsewhere where censorship prevails and prisons are full of writers.

So in countries that are supposed to be cultivated—and are the most free and democratic—literature is becom-

ing a hobby without real value, while in countries where freedom is restricted, literature is considered dangerous, the vehicle of subversive ideas. Novelists and poets in free countries, who view their profession with disillusionment, should open their eyes to this vast part of the globe that is not yet free. It might give them courage.

I have an old-fashioned view: I believe that literature must address itself to the problems of its time. Authors must write with the conviction that what they are writing can help others become more free, more sensitive, more clear-sighted; yet without the self-righteous illusion of many intellectuals that their work helps contain violence, reduce injustice, or promote liberty. I have erred too often myself, and I have seen too many writers I admired err—even put their talents

at the service of ideological lies and state crimes—to delude myself. But without ceasing to be entertaining, literature should immerse itself in the life of the streets, in the unraveling of history, as it did in the best of times. This is the only way in which writers can help their contemporaries and save literature from the flimsy state to which it sometimes seems condemned.

If the only point of literature is to entertain, then it cannot compete with the fictions pouring out of our screens, large or small. An illusion made of words requires the reader's active participation, an effort of the imagination and sometimes, in modern literature, complex feats of memory, association, and creativity. Television and cinema audiences are exempt from all this by virtue of the images. This makes them lazy and increasingly allergic to intellectually challenging entertainment.

Screen fiction is intense on account of its immediacy and ephemeral in terms of effect: It captivates us and then releases us almost instantly. Literary fiction holds us captive for life. To say that the works of authors such as Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and Proust are entertaining would be to insult them. For, while they are usually read in a state of high excitement, the most important effect of a good book is in the aftermath, its ability to fire memory over time. The afterglow is still alive within me because without the books I have read, I would not be who I am, for better or worse, nor would I believe what I believe, with all the doubts and certainties that keep me going. Those books shaped me, changed me, made me. And they continue changing me, in step with the life I measure them against. In those books I learned that the world is in bad shape and that it will always be so—which is no reason to refrain from doing whatever we can to keep it from getting worse. They taught me that in all our diversity of cultures, races, and beliefs, as fellow actors in the human comedy, we deserve equal respect. They also taught me why we so rarely get it. There is nothing like good literature to help us detect the roots of the cruelty human beings can unleash.

Without a committed literature it will become even more difficult to contain all those outbreaks of war, genocide, ethnic and religious strife, refugee displace-

ment, and terrorist activity that threaten to multiply and that have already smashed the hopes raised by the collapse of the Berlin Wall. Removing blindfolds, expressing indignation in the face of injustice, and demonstrating that there is room for hope under the most trying circumstances are all things literature has been good at, even though it has occasionally been mistaken in its targets and defended the indefensible.

The written word has a special responsibility to do these things because it is better at telling the truth than audiovisual media, which are by their nature condemned to skate over the surface of things and are much more constrained in their freedom of expression. The phenomenal sophistication with which news bulletins can nowadays transport us to the epicenter of events on every continent has turned us all into voyeurs and the whole world into one vast theater, or more precisely into a movie. Audiovisual information—so transient, so striking, and so superficial—makes us see history as fiction, distancing us by concealing the causes and context behind the sequence of events that are so vividly portrayed. This condemns us to a state of passive acceptance, moral insensibility, and psychological inertia similar to that inspired by television fiction and other programs whose only purpose is to entertain.

We all like to escape from reality; indeed, that is one of the functions of literature. But making the present unreal, turning actual history into fiction, has the effect of demobilizing citizens, making them feel exempt from civic responsibility, encouraging the conviction that it is beyond anyone's reach to intervene in a history whose screenplay is already written. Along this path we may well slide into a world where there are no citizens; only spectators, a world where, although formal democracy may be preserved, we will be resigned to the kind of lethargy dictatorships aspire to establish.

Mario Vargas Llosa is the author of, most recently, Death in the Andes (Penguin, 1997). Copyright © Prospect (May 1997). Subscriptions: £59.50/yr. (12 issues) from Freepost RM 1406, Romford RM6 5 BR, U.K. Distributed by New York Times Special Features/Syndication Sales.