

## INTERVIEW

## Watching the dictators

Mario Vargas Llosa was born in Arequipa, Peru, in 1936. He is author of many acclaimed novels, including *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter* (1982). Llosa has spent his life fighting totalitarianism - both on and off the page. Robert McCrum catches up with Llosa for an interview

**Robert McCrum:** What was the inspiration for *The Feast of the Goat*?

**Mario Vargas Llosa:** In 1975, I went to the Dominican Republic for eight months during the shooting of a film based on my novel *Captain Pantoja and the Special Service*. It was during this period I heard and read about Trujillo. I had the idea of a novel set with this historical background. It's a long project. I went many times to the Dominican Republic to read the papers, and also to interview many people: victims, neutral people and collaborators of Trujillo.

**RM:** To what degree is the book really about Alberto Fujimori?

**MVL:** Well, I think it's a book about Trujillo, but if you write about a dictator you are writing about all dictators, and about totalitarianism. I was writing not only about Trujillo but about an emblematic figure and something that has been experienced in many other societies.

**RM:** Particularly in Latin America.

**MVL:** When I was at university in the Fifties, Latin America was full of dictators. Trujillo was the emblematic figure because, of course, of his cruelty, corruption, extravagance, and theatricalities. He pushed to the extreme trends which were quite common to most dictators of the time.

**RM:** The corruption of power.

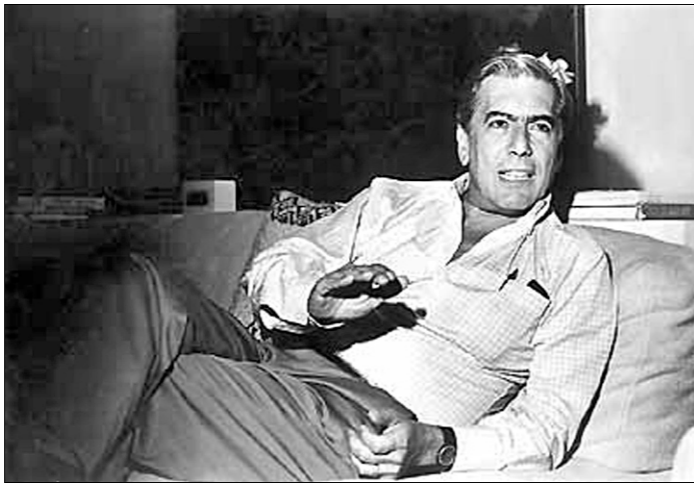
**MVL:** Dictators are not natural catastrophes. That's something I wanted to describe: how dictators are made with the collaboration of many people, and sometimes even with the collaboration of their victims.

**RM:** Do you have insights into dictatorship from your political experience?

**MVL:** My three years in politics was very instructive about the way in which the appetite for political power can destroy a human mind, destroy principles and values and transform people into little monsters.

**RM:** This novel is written partly from a woman's point of view. Was that a problem?

**MVL:** A challenge, not a problem. I wanted a woman to be one of the protagonists, because I think women were the worst victims of Trujillo. To his authoritarianism you have to add machismo. Trujillo used sex not only for pleasure but also as an instrument of power. And in this he went far further than many, many other dictators. He went to bed, for example, with the wives of his collaborators.



Mario Vargas Llosa

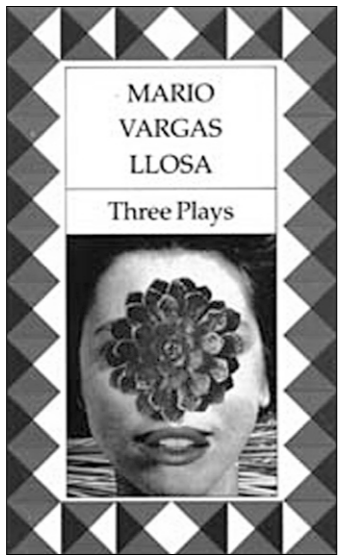
**RM:** Like a Shakespeare play.

**MVL:** In a way. Coriolanus is a fantastic play about this subject.

**RM:** When did you first know you wanted to be a writer?

**MVL:** It started not as writing but as reading. I learnt to read when I was five and I think that is the most important thing that happened to me.

**RM:** What kind of things did you read?



**MVL:** I read novels of adventure. At that time children read not comics but texts. I remember the magazines. I started to write continuations of these stories. Because I was frustrated that they'd finished. Sometimes I wanted to change the endings. It started like this kind of play.

**RM:** Like the plot of *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter*.

**MVL:** That's right. When I entered university I knew that what I would like to do is become a writer.

But at that time, in a society like mine, it was very difficult to decide to become only a writer... Well, what I tried to do, I'm going to make a living doing other things and literature would become my main interest, but my life would be taken by...

**RM:** Journalism?

**MVL:** Yeah. But when I came to Europe in 1958 I decided I'm going to try to be a writer and consecrate my time and my energies to writing. I



would survive doing marginal jobs. That was a very important moment in my life.

**RM:** Quite a number of your books have got you into trouble.

**MVL:** The writer's job is to write with rigour, with commitment, to defend what they believe with all the talent they have. I think that's part of the moral obligation of a writer, which cannot be only purely artistic. I think a writer has some kind of responsibility at least to participate in the civic debate. I think literature is impoverished, if it becomes cut from the main agenda of people, of society, of life.

**RM:** Does that reflect the more public role of the writer in Latin America?

**MVL:** I think the contribution of writers to the public debate is something that can make a difference. If culture is completely cut from what is going on it becomes very artificial.

**RM:** Is this love of controversy in your nature or intrinsic to your subjects?

**MVL:** My books don't fit very easily into stereotypes. I think that is one explanation. I have tried always to be an independent writer. That doesn't mean that I have not been wrong. Probably I've been wrong many times.

**RM:** What made you go into politics?

**MVL:** Well, I always was involved in politics, but as an intellectual. In the late Eighties I thought it was necessary to have a practical commitment with politics... it was the wrong decision.

**RM:** Were you shocked by the failure of your ideas to be taken up?

**MVL:** Well, I was, but it was worse than that. In a democratic election you win or lose, but what happened afterwards was very confusing. Fujimori won the election. Then what he did was to initiate some of the reforms I was offering. And for many years Fujimori was popular. As Trujillo and many dictators are. This was very shocking.

**RM:** Do you think you've put that phase of your life behind you? You've written *A Fish in the Water*.

**MVL:** Oh, absolutely. Literature has this extraordinary power. You write about something and even if it is the worst experience, I think you achieve a catharsis, and are completely cured.

**RM:** How much time do you spend in London?

**MVL:** I manage to spend at least three months a year in London.

**RM:** You are known in this country for your approval of Mrs Thatcher.

**MVL:** It's very sad what has happened with Mrs Thatcher. When she took power she really made an extraordinary impact on British life, society, politics. But then I am afraid she will be remembered more as a very bitter Conservative fighting against Europe, and saying absurd things about Europe. What has happened in Britain is very interesting, because I am convinced that the best disciple of Mrs Thatcher is Tony Blair, who has been following the kind of reforms that Mrs Thatcher started.

## BOOK REVIEW

## A thug's life

This is an ambitious novel, as sure-footed as it is graphic in integrating the private aspects of daily life in the Trujillo years with the public, or hypothetical motives with real events. Of all the Spanish American novelists I've read, Vargas Llosa is far and away the most convinced and accomplished realist; and he's at his strongest in *The Feast of the Goat*, writes John Sturrock.

*The Feast of the Goat*

Mario Vargas Llosa, trans Edith Grossman, 404pp, Faber, £16.99

**S**PANISH-American novelists have had good reason, sad to say, to write dictator novels, and two rather different ways in which to go about it. The first is to abstract from the historical experience of any one country and treat the contagion of caciquismo in imaginary terms, as it might have taken hold anywhere in South and Central America - Miguel Angel Asturias, Augusto Roa Bastos, Alejandro Carpentier and García Márquez have all in their time done this to powerful effect. A second way is that followed by the Peruvian writer Mario Vargas Llosa in *The Feast of the Goat*, which is to descend to street level in a spirit of togetherness and recreate the circumstances in which one actual dictator met a violent death in a real country. There's nothing remotely allegorical about the story as it's told here, in very concrete terms, but it's not hard either to take this particular Strong Man as standing for the rest of his grisly cousinhood.

The dictator in question is Rafael Leonidas Trujillo Molina, an army officer who seized power in the Dominican Republic in 1930 and held on to it, with increasing savagery and the predictable support, for most of the time, of the United States, until he was assassinated in

a roadside shootout 31 years later. In the novel at least, the assassination is the work of a small group who have suffered more than most from the viciousness of the regime. It happens not as a denouement but halfway through, as a crisis, since Trujillo's long-overdue removal opens the way for politics of a less lethal sort to resume in the Republic. Vargas Llosa pursues the story through the immediate and psychotic aftermath, when Trujillo's playboy son, Ramfis - named, grotesquely, for the high priest in Aida - returns from his career of well-funded lechery in Paris to torture at length and put to death everyone suspected of involvement in his father's death, along, if need be, with his relatives.

By way of relief from the nastiness of this bloodbath, there's also the succession to power of Joaquín Balaguer, a puppet president under Trujillo who has kept in favour through three decades by never letting it be known what he was really thinking or feeling, but who can now come into his own as a sinuous pragmatist, able finally to kleeptocratic Trujillo clan to go into exile.

This is an ambitious novel, as sure-footed as it is graphic in integrating the private aspects of daily life in the Trujillo years with the public, or hypothetical motives with real events. Of all the Spanish American novelists I've read,

Vargas Llosa is far and away the most convinced and accomplished realist; and he's at his strongest in *The Feast of the Goat*. There's a great deal of hard detail in the book, as it takes to the various neighbourhoods of the Republic's capital city, Ciudad Trujillo (né Santo Domingo), itemising what and where people eat and drink, the music they like, and all the rest of it.

There are also references back in time to key episodes from recent Dominican history: the massacres of the Afro-American Haitians, who became economic migrants in the 1930s; the foiling of an attempted landing in 1960 by Castroites; the all-important relationship with the US, which turned disastrously sour for Trujillo after he went too far and tried to have the reformist president of Venezuela, Rómulo Betancourt, assassinated.

The danger of recreating local life in such fullness and with so many named characters involved, some historical, some presumably not, is that the novel's scope will seem too broad and restless for its own good, that it will lack an emotional centre. To guard against that, Vargas Llosa has allowed the story to be precipitated by the return to her native island of Urania Cabral, who was smuggled out by nuns as a sexually traumatised 14-year-old and whose father was one of Trujillo's unloveliest hangers-on, all the more squalid for having once been someone of culture.

Now, 35 years later and for the very first time, she has come back, a World Bank lawyer, to visit her father, lying speechless in bed after a stroke, in case she has it in her to forgive him for what he helped to do to his country, and to her. She doesn't; blood tie or no, the civilised world and the barbaric are not to be reconciled.

Vargas Llosa was never a behaviourist: he not only has people doing things, but tells us what they're thinking before and as they do them. Such all-inclusive impersonation is fine when the character is a Urania Cabral, say, or one of other of Trujillo's associates, or a young officer plotting his end. It's more questionable when the thoughts we're let in on are those of Trujillo himself, or of someone being tortured to death in a prison cell. The dictator's thoughts are of a nature necessarily only further to incriminate him, and thus do more to simplify than to explore the psychology of a tyrant; and as for the torture victim, what's happening to him is unspeakable, beyond any writer's power to react to it from within. This apart, *The Feast of the Goat* comes closer than is altogether pleasant to conveying what it would be like to have your conditions of life determined by the whims of an erratic and vainglorious thug like Trujillo.

## TRIBUTE

## All for the sake of beautiful expressions

Anuradha Dingwaney Needham remembers her long association with the poet Agha Shahid Ali, who died on December 8

**M**Y first impression of Shahid was through his laughter - a high-pitched cackle, sustained, exuberant, totally uninhibited and irreverent. It was during an intermission of a Shakespeare play performed at the Penn State, where I had arrived that very morning to begin work on my doctoral degree.

Here, I must digress to Shahid's characteristically Shahidian relationship with the bard: Shahid adored Shakespeare as a writer of brilliant lines, which he could quote verbatim from his prodigious memory. However, courses on Shakespeare's plays brought out Shahid's absolute impatience with plodding academic analyses. In a seminar with Kenneth Muir on Shakespeare's late plays, Shahid dashed out of the class one evening, peeling with laughter over a student's dull, two-session-long report. Muir at first thought Shahid had taken ill, though all of us knew otherwise.

Jet-lagged, out-of-sorts with the world and desperately home-sick, I was treated to my Shahidian

encounter, as he crowed about how I had heard of him as a rising poet in Delhi University, whereas he had never heard of me. "So tell me all about yourself," he insisted, taking me by the arm. Thus began our quarter-century long close association as friends and confidantes.

Shahid saw me through my first strenuous quarter, building and consolidating my confidence in an unfamiliar, alien place. He read, edited and even typed my term paper. What would a provincial like me know, he would ask, about the intricate grammar of comma splices and dangling modifiers, so beloved of the writing programme at Penn? Shahid had, of course, already negotiated that bit, having been here for a whole year. "Hum [Shahid and me] to *bade hoshiar hain*" was our oft-repeated refrain, our loud and appreciative praise for each other, as we worked our way through the US education system.

Shahid read his poems to me, and instructed me about how to write better. He was instrumental in my

(still continuing) love affair with Rasoolan Bai, Siddheshwari Devi, Kesarbai Kerkar, Sheila Dhar and the *ghazals* of Begum Akhtar. He would always ask whether I understood what Begum Akhtar was singing, and if I looked blank, as I often did, he would berate me, "Why are you so proud, why won't you ask?"

To know Shahid was to be drawn into his circle of friends, and most of all his family - all of them witty, diverse, infinitely sociable and relaxed, and so intellectually vibrant. I still remember the dinner parties we would throw together, the exquisite meals we would cook on our extremely modest budgets, the cheap wines we would consume as if it was manna from heaven! Shahid would cook all sorts of Kashmiri delicacies for me - *rogan josh*, *macch*, *raazma*, *kachumber*.

On one point, in our early years at university, Shahid came up with the idea of selling blood to a nearby clinic so we could supplement our meagre graduate student income

and continue throwing parties. So every Wednesday and Friday we headed off for this clinic, selling our blood, collecting our measly \$6.00, and spending it immediately at the Corner Room on greasy fries dipped in garlic mayonnaise. "We have to keep up our strength," Shahid would argue.

On my second last visit to his place, Shahid had an inexpressibly valuable gift waiting for me. As we sat in his brother Lala's living room, he recited from memory the entire text of *The Dacca Gazews* reminding me of how much this poem and Shahid are inextricably linked in my mind. Will I ever be able to read *The Dacca Gazews* again now that Shahid is gone? Will I ever be able to read it again without remembering in all its exactitude this incredibly poignant last moment with Shahid as he was and will never be again except in my memory and imagination?

## ESSAY

## Demand for English

At the British Council Teaching centres in Dhaka and Chittagong, we encourage our students to accept that language learning is not something that can be given to them by an expert teacher, but something that they have to achieve for themselves. In short, whether we are speaking of education or democracy, it is important to remember that they are our responsibility, writes Mark Bartholomew

**T**HE global demand for proficiency in English becomes ever greater, as the Internet is available to increasing numbers of users and it gets harder to conduct business without a working knowledge of the language. It is as important to be able to chat on the Internet or over the telephone as it is to read and write reports or to make a joke with a business client in a restaurant.

One era the days when English was the property of a handful of rich families, whose children were educated abroad, and who felt as much at home with Dickens as they did with Tagore. Just as much of the wealth of this country is now created by people who would never have had the chance to shine a generation or two ago, it is clear that English belongs to everyone as a vehicle for their personal development. So, it is no longer sufficient for a school teacher to produce a few star pupils in the English class, while the rest are relegated to the ranks of those who have no talent for languages. These days, it is essential for all to be able to operate in English, if they wish to succeed in their careers or to take advantage of the leisure opportunities available only in this language.

Before arriving in Bangladesh, I had imagined that Bengali students would be relatively passive in the classroom and that women would not be as vocal as men. I had based this impression on the experiences I had had teaching for the British Council in other Asian countries. I could not have been more wrong! The classes I have taught here have been characterised by students with bubbly personalities and women that, as often as not, are more talkative than men. This is a great country for a teacher of English: students who are not only enthusiastic, but also have the confidence to make mistakes when they are speaking and writing. However, many problems remain.

Every reader of this newspaper is familiar with the reasons why English as a school subject was so long neglected. This has led to many problems: for instance, teachers, with classes of their own nowadays, often did not get much exposure to conversational English, when they were studying themselves. Large classes with an emphasis on learning accurate grammatical structures did not provide much opportunity to practise speaking and left many of today's English teachers lacking in confidence.

What is more, textbooks have remained in fashion in Bangladesh long after they have been discarded in other countries. A student of mine told me a story about having to memorise a poem for his homework. He was repeating it over and over again, when his father put his head round the door and started reciting it with him. The student was surprised that his father, who had little interest in poetry, would know it. "No surprise at all," said his father, "I had to learn exactly that poem myself when I was at school." Now, times change and so do the interests of school children. And, of course, language changes with the times too, meaning that much of the vocabulary used by Wordsworth and other English poets is thoroughly out of date. So, it is not only that Wordsworth, with his poetry about the countryside in the north of England, may not be very relevant to Bangladeshi kids living in urban environments, but also that the English they are fed is more appropriate to the eighteenth century, rather than the twenty-first.

But it is not only the curriculum that has remained the same. Teaching methods have changed little since independence. This is strange in a country that has achieved so much in striving to adopt more democratic models of government and has caused such dramatic changes in its social planning.

Witness, for example, the steps taken to improve the opportunities available to women, both in terms of cuts in the birth rate as well as increased educational facilities for girls.

Teachers often complain that parents are reactionary and do not tolerate any change to the curriculum or new trends in teaching methodology. But parents, students and teachers work together in a partnership and it is wrong, in my opinion, to expect people to accept changes if they cannot understand the reasons behind them. Are there enough opportunities for teachers to involve students in decisions about their own education, I wonder?

Any move towards more participatory methods of learning in the classroom would surely enhance students' ability to take responsibility for the government of their country and their duties towards their fellow citizens. Democracy is not something that is taken out and exercised only on one day every five years, but is a way of living. It applies just as much to the relationship between teachers, students and guardians, as it does to general elections. If we spoon feed our children, we must expect them to grow up passive and lacking in initiative. If we involve them in decisions about their own learning, we will encourage them to think that learning is as much their duty as teaching is the school's.

At the British Council Teaching centres in Dhaka and Chittagong, we encourage our students to accept that language learning is not something that can be given to them by an expert teacher, but something that they have to achieve for themselves. In short, whether we are speaking of education or democracy, it is important to remember that they are our responsibility, Writes.

Of course, a teacher is important in firing student's enthusiasm and pointing them in the right direction when they consistently make errors. If we at the British Council did not believe that, we would not be operating teaching centres at all. However, the spadework has to be done by the students themselves. The Teaching Centre in Dhanmondi and the libraries in Fuller Road and Chittagong have self access centres where students can improve their listening skills by listening to audio cassettes and answering worksheets or by using language learning CD roms to improve the accuracy of their grammar and vocabulary. Classes offer them the opportunities to speak that they often lack in their homes and professional lives. What all this points to is that the British Council is committed to providing both expert tuition and the facilities for students to help themselves. Of course, this does not only apply to our Teaching centres, but to our Libraries as well.

Now, then, does all this theorising relate to practice at British Council? First, we can say that there is no right time for education and, for that reason, we have courses for kids of six and adults of 106 (although they would not study in the same class). There are courses in General English where students learn the language by using all four skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking. What about grammar, I can imagine readers asking? My answer is that there is no grammar without those four skills and no-one can be a good speaker or writer without an equally good command of grammar. The banners and posters one sees all over city streets for "Spoken English and Grammar" are surely only reinforcing the myth that grammar can exist independently of using the language: without practice in speaking and writing, there will be no possibility of improving one's grammar. English is not Sanscrit or Latin; it is an active language that is there to be used.

abroad. (We can advise you on ratings of UK universities free of charge at the British Council and, if we know your needs, we can even find a suitable university course for you to follow in Britain). Entry to the most prestigious universities requires students to get the best grades possible, whether these are in SSCs and HSCs or their English medium counterparts, GCE O and A levels.

But the vast majority of students, of course, complete their secondary education in Bengali and, so, university education abroad is dependant upon their leaping another hurdle: IELTS. Although many different English language qualifications are acceptable to British, Canadian, American and many other universities (including IELTS, of course) Australian universities now only accept that single qualification. So, of course, the British Council offers preparation courses for students wishing to sit IELTS and can boast some of the finest results in the country. Not only are all our teachers experienced in coaching for these exams, they are also kept up to date about the latest developments in syllabus changes. There are few centres that can claim the same expertise in Bangladesh.

At the British Council, however, we are facing up to the fact that IELTS is not the answer for everyone. As the number of prospective candidates queuing for these exams grows and as we see younger and younger students asking for IELTS preparation courses, we are starting to wonder whether there are not more suitable alternatives for teenage candidates. Many teachers feel that the exam not only tests one's English but also requires wider reading and more mature academic skills than most school children have. The many students who have taken a course with us will vouch for the fact that the hardest elements of the exam are the reading and writing papers, due to the very specific and rigorous nature of the questions. Let's face it, how many youngsters know anything about fields as different as archaeology, homeopathic medicine and statistics? Now, while this does not usually pose insurmountable problems for graduates, it can be rather a daunting prospect for others.

For younger candidates, therefore, we often recommend the University of Cambridge's First Certificate in English as an alternative. Not only can the student choose from five different essay titles on themes such as writing letters or stories, but the themes are also not quite so academically challenging. In other words, the First Certificate in English concentrates more on every day English and a younger audience. But with such popular universities in Bangladesh as North London and Luton accepting a pass grade at this exam as sufficient evidence that students will be able to follow a degree course, the demand and appeal are obvious.

English is going to be the foreign language most frequently spoken for the rest of our lifetimes. There are already many, many times more non-native speakers of English than there are people who grew up listening to it all around them. English is not going to go away. At the British Council, we try to offer the best service you can get in Bangladesh and are always looking at how we can best remedy our deficiencies. We welcome competition, because we believe that there are places for many sorts of language teaching and niches for many kinds of institutions. Besides, competition gives us all new ideas and makes us try all the harder to improve what we are already so proud of.