

The New York Times

The Elder Statesman of Latin American Literature – and a Writer of Our Moment

Marcela Valdes

February 20, 2018

Shall we sit outside?” Mario Vargas Llosa asked me, gesturing through the library’s floor-to-ceiling windows at the brilliant September afternoon. The only Peruvian ever to have won a Nobel Prize, Vargas Llosa now lives in an eight-bedroom mansion on the fringes of Madrid, in the neighborhood known as Puerta de Hierro. When I arrived, a butler in a white jacket led me through the enormous two-story foyer, across gleaming black and white tiles, into a library lined with dark wood bookcases. A crystal ashtray sat next to silver dishes of chocolate and cigarettes. This imposing *casona* seemed like a fitting residence for the last living giant of a golden age of Latin American literature, a man who may well be the most politically important novelist of our time, but the house does not belong to Vargas Llosa. Over the library’s fireplace hung a portrait of its owner, Isabel Preysler, in a red dress.

Preysler, who was born in the Philippines but has lived in Spain since she was 16, built the home with her third husband, Spain’s former Minister of Economy and Finance Miguel Boyer, who died in 2014. Paparazzi often loiter around its gates; Preysler, 67, has been an object of fascination for Spanish-language tabloids ever since she married her first husband, the pop star Julio Iglesias, in 1971. (Her second husband was a Spanish marquis.) And it was something of a scandal that Vargas Llosa now had a desk with tidy piles of books and a bust of Honoré de Balzac in a little corner of her library amid Boyer’s old science and math books. He used to live in a floor-through apartment in the heart of historic Madrid, steps away from the Royal Theater, where the streets are as narrow as trenches. But in 2015, he left his wife of 50 years for Preysler. As I followed him out onto the terrace, I wondered briefly if part of Preysler’s appeal had been her ability to wrap him in such luxury.

We took seats under a white awning on a pair of white couches facing an aquamarine pool. My coffee arrived in a delicate pink china cup. As we talked, the sun slid behind a narrow forest of closely planted trees, which hid the street, the high stone walls and the long gravel driveway, giving the garden the illusion of a park. We talked for more than two hours in Spanish, about the Mississippi modernist William Faulkner and the Spanish superagent Carmen Balcells, about the TV shows “The Wire” and “Vikings.” For most of our conversation, Vargas Llosa was strikingly self-contained. He barely touched his glass of water and rarely moved his hands, though he said almost everything with a smile and ended many sentences with a laugh. He was like the home itself: a fortress camouflaged in the warmth of social grace. “He can strike one as being a very formal person, and he has cultivated that to some degree,” said Marie Arana, a Peruvian-American writer and former editor of The Washington Post’s books section. “People who are enormously attractive compensate by trying to be formal, to look serious.”

In March, Vargas Llosa will turn 82. He once looked like a dark-eyed John Travolta: full lips, strong chin, thick black hair. The hair is now white, but the serene manners and the prodigious self-discipline remain. He has written almost every morning of his life, publishing 59 books in 55 years, among them some of the greatest novels of the past half century: “The Time of the Hero,” “Conversation in the Cathedral,” “Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter,” “The Feast of the Goat.” “If I didn’t write,” he told *The Paris Review* in 1990, “I would blow my brains out, without a shadow of a doubt.” This week Vargas Llosa has three books coming out — English translations of a novel (“The Neighborhood”) and of a collection of political essays (“Sabers and Utopias”), as well as a new volume in Spain, “The Call of the Tribe,” which is not yet available in English. It’s a condensed history of three centuries of classical liberal thought, from Adam Smith to Jean-François Revel, that doubles as a kind of intellectual autobiography.

For Vargas Llosa, writing has always been a weapon against both despair and despotism, and “The Call of the Tribe” feels like his attempt to beat back the waves of nationalism and populism now flooding our world. He is a defender of individual liberty and democracy in Latin America. His attacks on authoritarians have made him enemies among both socialists and conservatives. What he most respects in a person, he told me, is integrity: “Consistency in what you believe, what you say and what you do.” And while his insistence on saying and doing exactly what he himself believes has left a scorched path in his personal life, it has also been the making of his career.

Until he was 10, Vargas Llosa enjoyed a pampered childhood in a house filled with members of his mother’s sociable, middle-class family, which can trace its pedigree to early Spanish colonists. Grandparents, aunts and uncles looked indulgently upon his pranks — spying on women from trees, bringing his entire class home for tea. He played Tarzan with his cousins and memorized poetry with his grandfather. His father, he was told, lived in heaven. He kissed a photo of him every night before bed. In truth, Ernesto Vargas was very much alive, but he had abandoned Mario’s mother, Dora Llosa, several months before his birth. Then, in 1946, Ernesto and Dora reunited and carried Mario off to Lima.

“When I went to live with my father, and I was feeling alone, feeling completely isolated, separated from the people whom I felt were my family, reading saved me,” Vargas Llosa told me. He buried himself in novels by Alexandre Dumas, Victor Hugo, Charles Dickens and Honoré de Balzac, dreaming of a life filled with adventure. “It was a marvelous way of not living the horrible life that I had.”

“When [my father] beat me,” Vargas Llosa writes in his 1993 memoir, “A Fish in the Water,” “I went off the deep end, and terror many times made me humble myself before him and beg his pardon with my hands joined. But that didn’t calm him down. And he went on hitting me, screaming and threatening to put me in the army as a private as soon as I was old enough to be a recruit so that I’d be set on the right path. When the whole scene was over and done with, and he could lock me in my room, it was not the blows, but rage and disgust with myself for having been so afraid of him and having humbled myself before him in that way, that made me spend a sleepless night, weeping in silence.”

Fiction and poetry were Mario’s refuge from Ernesto’s domestic despotism. They were also his defiance. “My father saw literature as something extremely dangerous,” Vargas Llosa said in the garden, brushing aside his old traumas with a laugh. “He thought that literature was a passport to failure in life, that it was a way of starving to death.” Novels, Ernesto also believed, were the

work of drunk bohemians and homosexuals. Bent on turning Mario into a real man, Ernesto enrolled his son in Leoncio Prado Military Academy when he was 14. “I went to Leoncio Prado because my father thought that the military was the best cure for literature and for those activities that he understood as very marginalized.” Vargas Llosa chuckled at the paradox. “On the contrary, he gave me the subject of my first novel!”

Even now, “The Time of the Hero” (1963) still has the power to shock with its scenes of bullying and dissipation among cadets. Highlights include: the gang rape of a chicken, blow jobs endured for liquor, officers’ kicking students and the killing of a boy nicknamed “Slave,” who marks himself for special humiliation when he makes the mistake of pleading for mercy with clasped hands. Incensed by the exposé, administrators at Leoncio Prado Military Academy rounded up 1,000 copies and set the books aflame in an official ceremony. But a judge for Spain’s prestigious Premio Biblioteca Breve Prize declared it “the best novel in the Spanish language in the past 30 years.” “The Time of the Hero” was among the first sensations of a transformative age of Latin American literature known as the Boom. (All its other major writers — Gabriel García Márquez, Julio Cortázar, Carlos Fuentes, José Donoso, Juan Rulfo, Miguel Ángel Asturias and Guillermo Cabrera Infante — have died.)

Vargas Llosa’s masterwork is “Conversation in the Cathedral” (1969). It’s Faulkner cross-pollinated with Balzac, modernist techniques used to paint a sweeping historical panorama. The structure of the novel spirals out from a single point: an unexpected meeting in 1960s Lima between Santiago Zavala, a 30-year-old reporter estranged from his upper-crust family, and Ambrosio, his family’s former chauffeur. The two run into each other at a pound, where Ambrosio slaughters dogs for money. Together, the men get drunk at a dive bar called the Cathedral, and from their conversation rises a blistering vision of the whole of Peru under Gen. Manuel Odría’s eight-year military dictatorship in the 1950s. Vargas Llosa implicates everyone in the moral catastrophe, from the bickering student dissidents to the cowardly media to the rich women drowning themselves in alcohol and gossip.

It is outrageous that “Conversation in the Cathedral” has never gotten the traction it deserves in the United States, and the novel’s English translation bears some of the blame. Gregory Rabassa — whose stunning translation of Gabriel García Márquez’s “One Hundred Years of Solitude” helped make that novel an American best seller — stumbles over Vargas Llosa’s more complex style, which shifts continually between the sinuous and the slangy. “Conversation in the Cathedral” will never be an easy read in any language — it’s a book for fans of Faulkner, Proust and Bolaño — but Rabassa’s errors dull its noir patina and obscure its thrilling tonal rapids. The Peruvian-American novelist Daniel Alarcón told me he shoved aside Rabassa’s version when he saw *Flaco* translated as “Skinny.” “It could have said, ‘Hey, Slim,’ or just kept *Flaco*,” he pointed out. “But ‘Hey, Skinny’? No one ever says that. That’s not a thing that’s said in human speech in English anywhere that I’ve ever heard. And I’ve been speaking English since I was 3.”

Why has García Márquez’s magical realism cemented its place on American bookshelves and syllabuses while Vargas Llosa’s gritty masterpieces are neglected? Vargas Llosa’s best books are harder to read than García Márquez’s. He’s less sentimental, dirtier, raunchier, angrier. “One Hundred Years of Solitude” looks like a Hallmark card next to “Conversation in the Cathedral.” You might be fired for assigning Vargas Llosa in high school English. And Vargas Llosa has published so many novels — 18 in all — that the tours de force can get lost among the mediocrities. His buttoned-up public demeanor hasn’t helped. “Gabo” was not only a tremendous

writer; he was an expert showman who once worked in advertising and cannily played up his Caribbean exoticism for foreign audiences. When the two fell out in the 1970s, many intellectuals leaned left toward García Márquez, while Vargas Llosa was shunned.

‘When I went to live with my father, and I was feeling alone, feeling completely isolated, separated from the people whom I felt were my family, reading saved me.’

Yet Vargas Llosa is the more daring, more democratic writer. While García Márquez cozied up to Fidel Castro and refined a distinctive style, Vargas Llosa reinvented his over and over again while defending free markets and reproductive freedom, gay rights and open elections. His political tracts underscore the value of diversity, of stellar public education, of equal opportunities for the poor. And his novels, whether they are kaleidoscopic histories, political thrillers, generational sagas or slapstick comedies, are remarkable for their ability to inhabit a host of perspectives. He’s especially good at the psychology of collaborators — the people who surround authoritarians and make their administrations function. Such characters were not popular among readers in the 1960s, ’70s and ’80s, who preferred García Márquez’s romantic heroes, but they might feel especially relevant to Americans today.

Two days after our meeting in Preysler’s garden, I saw Vargas Llosa at a news conference held inside the Casa de America in Madrid, in a small room baroquely decorated with cherubs, nudes and gold leaf. A bust of Simón Bolívar, the 19th-century Latin American freedom fighter, stared through a flank of television cameras. When Vargas Llosa entered the room, photographers rushed toward him, chirping “Mario, *por favor*” in hopes of cajoling him into a good shot. But that morning Vargas Llosa’s expression hovered near patrician indigestion — downturned mouth, indifferent gaze. As he faced the reporters arrayed before him, you could almost see the thought bubble rising above his head: *I gave up a morning of writing for this?*

The sacrifice was provoked by the debut of another book in Spanish. This volume, “Conversación en Princeton,” provides a view into a seminar that Vargas Llosa gave in 2015 with Rubén Gallo, a professor of language and literature at Princeton University. For months, Vargas Llosa, Gallo and his students discussed five of Vargas Llosa’s most famous books, including “Conversation in the Cathedral.” The whole project, Gallo explained, was inspired by his desire to do a careful, point-by-point questioning of “the Goethe of our own time” in a utopian space “free of any political pressure, and of any other pressures, save the pleasure of reading itself.”

Politics, however, were inescapable that week in Madrid. The leaders of Catalonia, the semiautonomous region that is home to Barcelona, were threatening to hold a referendum on the question of whether Catalans ought to secede from Spain. Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy had already declared such a referendum illegal, and Spain’s Constitutional Court had also ruled it unconstitutional. But Catalonia’s regional president, Carles Puigdemont, looked determined to proceed.

“How do you see what’s happening in Catalonia?” asked the first reporter during the event’s question-and-answer session. “I think we should focus on the book,” Vargas Llosa responded affably. Then he segued into a four-minute answer in which he recalled that Catalan nationalists were regarded as “little old reactionaries” during the 1970s; opined that the current referendum was “an absurd blunder, an anachronism that has nothing to do with the realities of our time”; and suggested that Catalan nationalism was a kind of “illness.” “My hope,” he said, “is that the

government will have the energy necessary to impede a coup — that is really what’s gestating — from taking place and to give it the appropriate sanctions.” Within hours, these pronouncements had made headline news in Spain, Venezuela and Peru.

It’s almost impossible to imagine the same reaction happening here if, say, Toni Morrison or Philip Roth voiced a political opinion. But Vargas Llosa looms as a political figure in his own right: He almost became the president of Peru in 1990, and he is still admired and loathed as one of Latin America’s most influential champions of limited government, free enterprise, democracy and rule of law. For the past 25 years, he has penned an op-ed column called “Touchstone” for the Spanish newspaper *El País* that is devoured by politicians in Spain and Peru. When Casa de America held an event to celebrate Vargas Llosa’s 80th birthday in 2016, attendees included the president of Chile (Sebastián Piñera), a former president of Uruguay (Luis Alberto Lacalle), two former presidents of Colombia (Álvaro Uribe and Andrés Pastrana) and two former prime ministers of Spain (José María Aznar and Felipe González). The event was kicked off with a speech from Prime Minister Rajoy.

“Words are acts,” Vargas Llosa said while we sat on Preysler’s terrace, emphasizing each word as if pointing at the sentence hovering in the air. This phrase by Jean-Paul Sartre, he told me, crystallized his understanding of the novelist’s political role in the 1950s. Back then, he was a Marxist. The scenes of Communist resistance in “Conversation in the Cathedral” were inspired by his own activities at the University of San Marcos in 1953.

“Imagine the ’50s, when I was very young and began to write,” he said. “A young Peruvian, Chilean, Colombian lived in a country where literature meant very little. It was the activity of a tiny elite, right? So if one had a certain social conscience of the problem in countries where there were enormous inequalities, well, many times that young man with a literary vocation would ask himself, what is the point of writing if I am Peruvian, if I am Chilean, if I am Colombian? Well, there Sartre was incredibly important, because Sartre had some ideas about literature that fit perfectly with a *muchacho* in an underdeveloped country. He had the idea that literature has a social, political, historical function, and that of course you could change things through literature. You could affect reality.”

In 1959, Vargas Llosa enthusiastically supported Fidel Castro’s socialist revolution in Cuba. At one point, he even housed Che Guevara’s mother in his apartment. But as Castro’s regime developed, Vargas Llosa grew uneasy. During a trip to Havana, he learned that gay Cubans were being imprisoned with counterrevolutionaries and common criminals in forced-labor camps. “Some of them had that totally idealistic idea that the revolution was not only going to bring socialism, but it was also going to change customs, that there would be a homosexual liberation,” he said. He told me he sent a private letter to Castro, expressing his confusion and surprise.

By 1971, however, such private protest felt insufficient. When the poet Heberto Padilla was subjected to a Stalinist show trial, Vargas Llosa gathered several friends at his home in Barcelona to draft a public denunciation of Castro. This famous “Padilla letter” appeared in the French newspaper *Le Monde* and was reprinted all over Latin America, signed by Susan Sontag, Octavio Paz, Carlos Fuentes, Julio Cortázar, Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre, among others. The fallout from its publication was atrocious, including accusations that Vargas Llosa worked for the C.I.A., as well as the beginning of the disintegration of his close friendship with García Márquez.

“But at the same time I felt a great freedom, you know?” Vargas Llosa told me. “Because until then ‘you can’t give weapons to the enemy.’ So you had to swallow all kinds of frogs and snakes” — the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, the labor camps in Cuba — “but after the Padilla affair, I never again swallowed a frog or snake.”

Vargas Llosa’s break with Castro precipitated a fundamental reconstruction of his political beliefs. By 1982 he was having dinner with Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and the classical liberal philosopher Isaiah Berlin at the home of the historian Hugh Thomas in London. This political conversion had an impact on his literary reputation. Gerald Martin, who wrote the definitive biography of García Márquez and is now working on another about Vargas Llosa, believes it was the most important factor keeping him from a Nobel win. “It was generally believed before with Lundkvist” — Artur Lundkvist, an influential member of the Swedish Academy — “that he preferred the Socialist, Marxist, Communist, radical, progressive writers,” Martin told me. Vargas Llosa received the prize for literature only after the Nobel committee had changed by the early 2000s.

It didn’t help that Vargas Llosa’s beliefs were often subject to gross distortion. Carlos Granés, the editor who assembled “Sabers and Utopias,” told me that he once heard the Peruvian author Dante Castro Arrasco declare that if Vargas Llosa had become president of Peru, he would have replaced the national coat of arms with a swastika. In truth, Vargas Llosa’s politics are closer to libertarian, and he has denounced every Latin American authoritarian of his lifetime. “Sabers and Utopias” shows him inveighing against not only leftists like Hugo Chávez in Venezuela but also Gen. Augusto Pinochet in Chile and the Peronist military dictatorship in Argentina.

“Mario Vargas Llosa has been a central figure — central, central, central — for democracy, human rights and fundamental freedoms,” José Miguel Vivanco, the Americas director of Human Rights Watch, told me. “I don’t think I’m exaggerating. He’s some sort of father of the current Peruvian democracy.”

In the weeks after I saw him in Madrid, Vargas Llosa traveled to Chile — where he endorsed Sebastián Piñera for re-election and insulted the country’s conservatives for trying to repeal a new law legalizing abortion — then to Moscow and to Barcelona, where he addressed thousands of Spaniards rallying in the streets against the prospect of Catalan independence. Then one night in early November, he and Preysler landed in New York City. Before sitting with me at the Four Seasons, he walked for an hour in Central Park, as he did every morning while staying in Manhattan. Early constitutionals were once a staple of Vargas Llosa’s routine, but he no longer takes them in Madrid. “The problem is that being with Isabel, it’s impossible to have a public life,” he said. “We can only go from house to house.” Everywhere they appear, paparazzi materialize.

“I think that one of the things he loves about New York,” Gallo told me, “is that he can walk, he can go into any restaurant for dinner. It’s funny because generally the people who recognize him, when I’ve been with him, are the Latin American waiters.” Shortly after Vargas Llosa received the Nobel in 2010, however, he and Gallo were almost crushed on Princeton’s campus by thousands of Peruvians who swarmed them after a public event. Most of them lived in nearby Paterson, N.J. Gallo recalled them shouting: **Mario, an autograph for my grandma! Mario, I voted for you!**

The mobs were not always so friendly when Vargas Llosa campaigned for president of Peru in the 1990 election. His house received bomb threats. His van was attacked. Members of his political party, the Freedom Movement, were murdered. His candidacy had emerged unexpectedly in 1987, after he penned a vitriolic op-ed against President Alan García's plan to nationalize Peru's banks. Soon after, Vargas Llosa stopped writing fiction to create the Freedom Movement. His eldest son, Álvaro Vargas Llosa, then 23, became the campaign spokesman.

Vargas Llosa's platform attracted new people to Peruvian politics, including the corporate executive Beatriz Merino, who later served as prime minister of Peru. But most Peruvians were fed up with political parties. During the 1980s, the incompetence of Peru's political class had turned the country into a nightmare. Terrorist groups killed some 17,000 people and controlled large swaths of the sierras. Hyperinflation hit 7,650 percent in 1990. At least one-third of the country's population lived in poverty. Vargas Llosa's call to reduce state subsidies terrified many of these citizens, as did his connections to the rich, white elite that dominated Peru like an oligarchy. Nevertheless, for much of the campaign, polls predicted a Vargas Llosa win. Then, in the final laps of the campaign, an unknown agricultural engineer named Alberto Fujimori started closing in.

Fujimori mocked and attacked Vargas Llosa relentlessly, drawing attention to his agnosticism, his international connections, his earnest intellectualism and his racy novels. A son of cotton pickers from Japan, he presented himself as an outsider who would defend Peru's poor and working class from a foreign neoliberal "economic shock." Fujimori himself sometimes appeared on a tractor. He had a gift for vague, emotionally resonant statements. But Fujimori won only because Peru's leftists and centrists swung behind him for the sole purpose of sinking Vargas Llosa. Then almost immediately after he took office, Fujimori pivoted right and implemented a version of the "economic shock" that Vargas Llosa had recommended. This reversal depended on the collaboration of the same economists, lawyers and business owners who had rallied around the Freedom Movement. But by 1992 — after Fujimori used tanks to shut down Peru's Congress because it resisted his reforms — it became obvious that many of Vargas Llosa's former supporters did not feel as strongly about freedom as he did.

Fujimori foreshadowed a new wave of authoritarians in Venezuela, Ecuador and Bolivia. The political scientists Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way have coined a term for this kind of regime: "competitive authoritarianism." On paper, it looks a lot like democracy. In practice, it operates more like autocracy. Yet Fujimori's popularity remained high for much of the 1990s. As Vargas Llosa predicted, economic reforms finished hyperinflation. And in 1992, Peruvian police officers captured the leader of the most grotesquely violent guerrilla group in Latin American history, the Shining Path, allowing them to dismantle it. These two triumphs are why some Peruvians claim that Fujimori "saved" Peru, even though his government formed military death squads, suspended habeas corpus, crushed the free press, mishandled a cholera epidemic, sterilized thousands of indigenous women, blackmailed opponents and fomented widespread corruption.

Sitting over a glass of tomato juice at the Four Seasons, Vargas Llosa emphasized that he never worked against Fujimori until he brought out the tanks. "Not only did I respect the election, I was one of the first to congratulate Fujimori, to wish him luck," Vargas Llosa said. "And during the two years that he governed legally as president, I did not make the most minimal opposition." But when Fujimori shut down Congress, Vargas Llosa became his enemy. He asked the international community to cut off aid to Fujimori and noted (correctly) that Latin American

militaries often favor coups d'état. In response, Fujimori's head of the armed forces, Nicolás de Bari Hermoza, suggested that Vargas Llosa was deliberately harming Peruvians. Álvaro Vargas Llosa told me that they learned of a plan to strip the entire Vargas Llosa family of its Peruvian citizenship. Mario appealed to Spain, and in 1993 it granted him citizenship. In Peru, this event was widely perceived as the petulant betrayal of a sore loser.

Vargas Llosa's last masterpiece (so far) was written in the midst of his battle with Fujimori. "The Feast of the Goat" recounts the final days of the notorious Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo, a man who modernized and savaged the Dominican Republic for three decades until his assassination in 1961. Vargas Llosa first studied Trujillo in 1974, when he visited the Dominican Republic for a few weeks to work on a French documentary about the country. But it was only after 1992 that he felt a compulsion to write a novel on the narcissistic dictator and his love of macabre spectacle.

If you have never read Vargas Llosa before, this is the place to start. Gorgeous and harrowing, "The Feast of the Goat" is also the most accessible of his great political fictions. Here his taste for baroque narrative multiplicity has been simplified to just a handful of perspectives, and Edith Grossman's translation is superb. Trujillo, Vargas Llosa writes, is an "astute exploiter of men's vanity, greed and stupidity." Almost every character collaborates with him as long as they believe that he can help them gain power or money. Even the man who organizes Trujillo's assassination first guards the dictator's life. Trujillo nevertheless murders his brother and destroys his reputation. Trujillo had killed him in stages, the man reflects later, "taking away his decency, his honor, his self-respect, his joy in living, his hopes and desires, turning him into a sack of bones tormented by a guilty conscience that had been destroying him gradually for so many years."

Fujimori's regime came apart the same year that "The Feast of the Goat" was published in Spanish. On Sept. 14, 2000, the media aired footage of Fujimori's head of secret intelligence, Vladimiro Montesinos, paying a congressman \$15,000 to switch to Fujimori's party. Two months after the tape surfaced, Fujimori made an unscheduled trip to Japan and faxed his resignation from a Tokyo hotel room. By then more than \$50 million had been located in foreign bank accounts in Montesinos's name. Five years later, Fujimori was arrested in Chile, and he was eventually extradited to Peru. In 2009, he was sentenced to 25 years in prison for, among other atrocities, his role in creating a death squad that murdered an 8-year-old boy.

'What you have to understand about him is that he's a person who gives himself with absolute passion to what he believes in, even when he is wrong.'

Álvaro moved back to Lima during the final year of Fujimori's regime to join the democratic resistance, and after Fujimori's collapse, Vargas Llosa's influence in Peru soared. In 2011, father and son used their new political capital to derail the presidential hopes of Fujimori's daughter, Keiko. To defeat her, Keiko's opponents rallied behind Ollanta Humala, a man Hugo Chávez endorsed in Peru's 2006 election. After interviewing Humala in Vargas Llosa's office, Álvaro helped arrange a public meeting at which Humala swore a democratic oath. Vargas Llosa sent a video endorsement that played at the event. "If Vargas Llosa had not supported Ollanta Humala against Keiko Fujimori, Ollanta Humala would not have won," the Peruvian political scientist Alberto Vergara told me. "They moderated Humala so that he could win the runoff."

“Half the country hated us, obviously,” Álvaro said. “And until this day they won’t forgive us. But in the end I think that what they won’t forgive us is that we were right.” Humala did not become an authoritarian. When his term in office ended, he stepped down. He is now in jail awaiting trial for corruption.

A week after our meeting at the Four Seasons, the Getty Trust presented blue-ribboned medals to Vargas Llosa and the German artist Anselm Kiefer at the Morgan Library in Manhattan. The evening began with a cocktail party in a room that felt like a giant sinkhole lined with rare books. Vargas Llosa and Preysler stood near each other in one corner of the room. Neither of them held a cocktail. (Vargas Llosa does not like hard liquor.) Preysler, who is known for her fashionable wardrobe, appeared deliberately understated in a simple navy dress that matched Vargas Llosa’s blue tie. Álvaro and his wife, Susana Abad, were there as well, chatting with Carlos Pareja, the ambassador from Peru. Three of Vargas Llosa’s granddaughters stood in a clutch, one of them in a brilliant white jumpsuit that made her look like the reincarnation of Bianca Jagger, circa Studio 54.

As the cocktail hour dragged on, Vargas Llosa became restless. “It’s marvelous to sit or to walk,” he said, “but standing around is horrible.” He is a man who likes to be doing, not waiting, and I got the sense that for him and Preysler all their charming, pre-awards chitchat was a kind of necessary work. Finally the bells chimed for dinner. Vargas Llosa escorted Preysler to the meal on his arm.

In our conversations, Vargas Llosa declined to discuss his romantic entanglements. When I asked him what had fractured his marriage to Patricia Llosa, which produced three children, he dropped all his smiles and chuckles. “Look,” he said, “that topic has to do with love. Love is probably the most enriching experience that a human being can have. Nothing transforms a person’s life as much as love. At the same time, love is a private experience. If it’s made public, it becomes cheap, shoddy, full of commonplaces. This is why it’s so hard to write about love in literature. You have to find the most clever ways so that it doesn’t lose its authenticity and become commonplace. So I think that a person shouldn’t talk about love precisely if love is so important in his life.”

You’re a romantic, I said.

“I think we all are. I think that romanticism has marked our lives very much, that it’s very difficult not to be romantic in some way, although many of us don’t realize it. You live it or you reject it. You vaccinate yourself against it. Let’s say that I haven’t rejected it. When it’s happened, I’ve lived it.”

The first time he lived it was in 1955, when he eloped with his aunt’s sister, Julia Urquidi Illanes. At the time, Vargas Llosa was a 19-year-old university student, and Urquidi was a 29-year-old divorcée. Ernesto Vargas was so enraged by their marriage that he threatened to kill Mario. But the couple refused to divorce. The day Ernesto accepted the marriage, Vargas Llosa writes in his memoir, marked his “definitive emancipation” from his father. But nine years later, they divorced, and a year after, in 1965, he married his first cousin Patricia Llosa Urquidi, Julia’s niece. In her memoir, “What Varguitas Didn’t Say,” Julia suggests the cousins began their romance when Patricia visited them in Paris in 1960, when Mario was 24 and Patricia was 15.

Forty-five years into their marriage, Vargas Llosa declared in his Nobel lecture that Patricia “does everything and does everything well. She solves problems, manages the economy, imposes order on chaos, keeps journalists and intrusive people at bay, defends my time, decides appointments and trips, packs and unpacks suitcases and is so generous that even when she thinks she is rebuking me, she pays me the highest compliment: ‘Mario, the only thing you’re good for is writing.’” The year she turned 70, however, he left her for Preysler.

Photo

“What you have to understand about him is that he’s a person who gives himself with absolute passion to what he believes in, even when he is wrong,” Álvaro told me. Of all Vargas Llosa’s children, Álvaro has been the most accepting of his father’s new relationship, perhaps because their ties go far beyond the familial. Vargas Llosa’s daughter, Morgana, a photographer and documentary filmmaker who lives in Peru, told me that she was shocked when Vargas Llosa appeared with Preysler in the Spanish-language celebrity weekly ¡Hola! just days after the entire family had gathered to celebrate Patricia and Mario’s 50th anniversary. Now she takes the situation more stoically. “Seeing how marriages fall apart after two, three, five or 10 years, I think it’s an absolute success to have shared a life together for 50 years,” she said.

But Vargas Llosa’s younger son, Gonzalo, who works with the United Nations in Britain, still reels from the way Mario handled the divorce. “We had a very special and very close relationship, and I love him greatly,” he told me. But he was enormously disappointed when Mario told ¡Hola! that his first year with Preysler had been the happiest year of his life. “If the year in which you leave your wife of 50 years and you don’t speak to your son is the happiest year of your life, well, that doesn’t say a great deal about whatever he may have really felt,” Gonzalo told me. “So this is fine to think, but why say it publicly? This what I find distasteful but also hurtful.”

Divorce, and its painful aftermath, can happen in any family. But what galls many people, including Gonzalo, is that Preysler embodies the celebrity entertainment culture that Vargas Llosa long claimed to abhor. A woman of feline poise and beauty, she has shrewdly parlayed tabloid attention into a kind of proto-Kardashian career: hosting television shows, promoting luxury goods like Rabat jewelry and Porcelanosa tiles. Their social life is now extensively documented by ¡Hola!, where Preysler herself once worked, as well as by many less savory gossip sheets. A quick online search turns up images of the couple sailing on the Costa Azul, watching bullfighting in Seville and attending parties at Dumfries House with Prince Charles.

“There are hundreds of publications, radio and television programs, that feed a kind of morbid curiosity that consists of basically revealing the private lives of people,” Vargas Llosa told me in Madrid. “Many people are delighted. On the contrary, it’s a real profession to show your privacy. It’s a kind of striptease, no, of a life, especially sexual, erotic. And it’s a world that literally produces horror in me.”

This “profession” is Preysler’s, however, and as long as they are together it will be, in some way, Vargas Llosa’s profession as well. In December the Spanish edition of Harper’s Bazaar magazine published a soft-focus video of the couple embracing and talking about their life together — precisely the sort of thing that, to listen to Vargas Llosa, “literally produces horror” in him. This sudden, major gap between what Vargas Llosa says and what he does reminds me of a conversation we had about his puckish character Fonchito, a boy with the face of an angel and

a taste for Egon Schiele. In “The Discreet Hero” (2013), Fonchito develops an interest in religion and asks his father, Don Rigoberto, “Could you tell me what this Sodom and Gomorrah is, Papa?”

Sometimes I wonder if Fonchito is your alter-ego, I said to Vargas Llosa.

“Who knows?” he said, chuckling. “He’s a character who disturbs me a bit because I don’t really understand him very well.” A moment later he added, “I can’t tell if he’s really so innocent or if he’s concealing something or if it’s a way of behaving that’s clever, no?”

Fonchito first appeared in Vargas Llosa’s erotic comedies “In Praise of the Stepmother” (1988) and “The Notebooks of Don Rigoberto” (1997). Most critics ignore these libertine novels when they discuss Vargas Llosa’s work. His own fans tend to regard them with either distaste or hilarity. But the skittishness about sex has kept readers and critics from appreciating how erotics pervade all of Vargas Llosa’s fiction. Even the novels that are best known for their political dissections are filled with a kind of transgressive sexual realism: scenes in brothels, secret homosexual affairs, rapes. “People don’t tend to think of him as an erotic writer, but his literary project is so interesting in part because of the way it connects sexuality with politics,” Gallo told me. “I think there is an idea, and he’s said as much, that a dictatorship affects all the levels of citizens’ lives, including the sexual sphere.”

Nowhere has this connection been as explicit, or as graphic, as in Vargas Llosa’s latest novel, “The Neighborhood.” The story opens with best friends Marisa and Chabela in bed. A few pages in we find the words “perspire,” “clitoris,” “scratching” and “happiness” — their platonic evening has transformed into a lesbian affair. In Vargas Llosa’s opinion, this scene, and the novel’s many other triple-X plot twists, realistically capture the bedroom adventures that occurred during the darkest part of the Fujimori years. Lima’s authoritarian curfew, which forbade residents to travel through the city at night, turned many dinners and parties into spontaneous sleepovers, he told me, with some inevitably kinky consequences.

“In those periods of tension, of terrible aggravation, eroticism often springs up as a compensation, no?” he said. “It’s a way of distracting oneself, of losing oneself. It’s like the idea of the end of the world. The world is ending: All sins are allowed.”

The last time I saw Vargas Llosa was on a freezing night at the Cato Institute in Washington. He looked exhausted. He and Álvaro had spent all day planning the next round of meetings, debates and conferences for the International Foundation for Liberty, the organization they use to support their political agenda all over Latin America. After some 14 hours of work, he stood in the Hayek Auditorium — a high-tech space of white walls and red velvet chairs — before a multinational audience of reporters, diplomatic professionals, Cato staff members and friends who expected him to explain the global rise in populism.

“Communism has destroyed itself by its total incapacity to fulfill all the expectations that were put into this system to bring prosperity, justice, happiness, culture to a society,” he said in English. “But populism is much more difficult to fight because it’s not an ideology, not a system with principles, with ideas that we can refute rationally.”

As recently as three years ago, it seemed as if Vargas Llosa’s political values had conquered the world. Almost everywhere in Latin America, the totalitarian regimes that he opposed had collapsed — while free markets, democracy and sexual liberation found favor. But in 2016, the

tide seemed to change. During our conversations, he recalled feeling astonished during a visit to England shortly before the vote on Brexit. For Vargas Llosa, London had long been a model of how polyglot pluralism, democracy and free markets should work together. Yet there was Boris Johnson on his hotel television, shamelessly declaring that Britain's payments to the European Union subsidized bullfights in Spain.

"To lie so brazenly, so cynically," Vargas Llosa told me. "Well, I was amazed." He never imagined that such retrograde tactics could work in Britain. "Now," he said, "it's been proved that no country is really vaccinated against demagoguery or populism." In Europe, it's easy to name major political figures, like Angela Merkel in Germany, who embrace the principles of liberal economics while also defending a liberal society. That's rare in Latin America. "The attraction to a caudillo is a characteristic that many Latin American countries share," the Peruvian journalist Diego Salazar told me. "And not just Latin Americans. In fact, President Trump is the first Latin American president of the United States in that respect."

In 2016, Keiko Fujimori lost the presidency by only 0.2 percent of the vote, and her party, Popular Force, gained a majority in Congress that she has used, in true competitive-authoritarian fashion, to attack her strongest opponents. In late December, Popular Force nearly deposed President Pedro Pablo Kuczynski in a legislative coup. Kuczynski was saved only by the intercession of Alberto Fujimori and his son, Kenji, who persuaded nine congressmen to sit out the key vote. Soon after, Kuczynski granted Alberto a Christmas Eve pardon. It's widely believed that the abstentions were quid pro quo for this release.

"We have always had to choose between the lesser of two evils," Gustavo Gorriti, editor of the investigative-news outlet IDL-Reporteros, said about Peruvians. "And we have had substandard democratic candidates, which we chose to elect just in order to avoid the return to the Fujimori dictatorship." But the Fujimoris are now essentially in power — Kuczynski's political survival depends upon their favor — and Peru's loose coalition of democratically minded forces may not pull off another win in the 2021 elections.

Vargas Llosa's own role in these battles is diminishing. The pain and friction of his unexpected divorce have estranged him from Peru and strained many of his old friendships. He does not travel to Lima as often or stay long when he goes. The apartment where Álvaro met with Humala now belongs solely to Patricia Llosa, who has dismantled Vargas Llosa's office and is turning it into a TV room. His political opinions will always matter in Lima, but now that he has opted to join Preysler's jet set, they will carry less weight. Gonzalo Vargas Llosa predicted this shift at the start of his father's affair. "He was a god for me not just because I loved him as a father," he told me, "but because I thought he was the most brilliant and important and inspiring intellectual that I had ever come across or read about. And when I see a Nobel Prize winner giving interviews to ¡Hola!, I feel sad that he has allowed himself to become part of a world which is intellectually so absolutely poor."

Nothing may transform a life as much as love, but Vargas Llosa has always been hard to comprehend. He's a modernist and a comedian, a politician and an aesthete, an intellectual and a libertine. Writing was not simply a refuge from or a rebellion against Ernesto, he told me in Preysler's garden; it was "a way of revealing myself to be different from what he wanted me to be." His whole life has been a series of these startling revelations. Perhaps we all contain multitudes, but Vargas Llosa has put his contradictions into action, in his life and on the page.

