

Literature and Freedom

by Mario Vargas Llosa

Nothing has pushed forward cultural life as much as the invention of printing, nor has anything contributed more to its democratization. From Gutenberg's time until today, the book has been the best propeller and depository of knowledge, as well as an irreplaceable source of pleasure.

However, to many, its future is uncertain. I recall a lecture I heard at Cambridge a few years ago. It was entitled "Literature Is Doomed," and its thesis was that the alphabetic culture, the one based on writing and books, is perishing. According to the lecturer, audiovisual culture will soon replace it. The written word, and whatever it represents, are already an anachronism, since the more avant-garde and urgent knowledge required for the experience of our time is transmitted and stored not in books but in machines, and has signals and not letters as its tools. The lecturer had spent two weeks in Mexico where he had traveled everywhere, and even in the underground he had no difficulty, though he spoke no Spanish. For the entire system of instructions in the Mexican underground consists of nothing but arrows, lights, and figures. This way of communication is more universal, he explained, for it overcomes, for instance, language barriers, a problem con-

genital to the alphabetic system.

The lecturer drew all the right conclusions, with no fear, from his thesis. He maintained that all Third World countries, instead of persisting in those long and costly campaigns aimed at teaching their illiterate masses how to read and write, should introduce them to what will be the primordial source of knowledge: the handling of machines. The formula that the slender speaker used with a defiant wink still rings in my ears: "Not books but gadgets." And, as a consolation to all those who might be saddened by the prospect of a world in which, what was yesterday made and obtained by writing and reading, would be done and attained through projectors, screens, speakers, and tapes, he reminded us that the alphabetic period in human history had in any case been short-lived. Just as mankind had, for thousands of years, created splendid civilizations without books, so the same could happen in the future. Why, then, should the underdeveloped countries insist on imposing an obsolete education on their citizens? So as to keep on being underdeveloped?

The lecturer did not think the alphabetic culture would totally vanish, nor did he wish it. He forecast that the culture of the book would survive in certain university and intellectual enclaves, for the entertainment and benefit of the marginal groups interested in producing and consuming it, as something curious and tangential to the main course of the life of nations.

The exponent of this thesis was not Marshall McLuhan,

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the Canadian prophet who announced the death of the book in 1980. It was Sir Edmund Leach, eminent British social anthropologist, then provost of King's College. That is to say, a distinguished mandarin of the alphabetic culture of our time. We should not take such statements lightly. If Sir Edmund Leach thinks that the alphabet stinks, something in the alphabet must be rotten.

It is true that for many people the written word is becoming more and more dispensable. The most flagrant example is to be found among the children of our time, to whom television programs give what novels of Karl May, Salgari, Jules Verne, and the great Alexandre Dumas gave me. Radio and television have taken the place of newspapers and magazines as the main source of information on current affairs, and although the number of readers in the world is growing in absolute terms, there is no doubt that, relatively speaking, the printed word has less influence today than it had in the past. Books are less important to the literate people of today (considering the time they devote to them and the effect they have on their lives) than they were to the literate people of the past. This should worry us, because although I doubt that the prophecy of Professor Leach will materialize soon, if it does come true it will probably be a disaster for humanity.

My pessimism is based on two certainties. First, that the audiovisual culture is more easily controlled, manipulated, and degraded by power than the written word. Because of the solitude in which it is born, the speed at which it can be reproduced and circulated, the secrecy with which it conveys its message, and the lasting mark on people's conscience of literary images, the written word has revealed a stubborn resistance to enslavement. In all totalitarian and authoritarian societies, if there is dissidence, it is through the written word that it manifests and keeps itself alive. In a good number of places, writing is the last bastion of freedom. With its demise, the submission of minds to political power could be total. In the kingdom of audiovisual, the master of technology and budget is the king of cultural production. And in a closed society, this always means, directly or indirectly, the state. It would decide what men should and should not learn, say, hear, and (in the end) dream. There would be no underground culture, no counterculture, no *samizdat*. This society, once personal choice and initiative in cultural activities are removed, would easily slip into mental slavery.

And the robot citizens of that world would probably also be dumb. Because, unlike books, the audiovisual product tends to limit imagination, dull sensibility, and create passive minds. I am not a retrograde, allergic to audiovisual culture. On the contrary, after literature I love nothing more than the cinema and I deeply enjoy a good television program. But the impact of the audiovisual on the spirit never matches the effect of books: it is ephemeral, and the participation of the listener's or the spectator's intellect and fantasy is minimal compared with that of the reader's. Even in the few countries where television has reached a high level of creativity, the average program, that which sets the pattern, is cheap, its strategy being to embrace the widest audience running for the lowest common denominator.

I do not believe this to be accidental. Technology and budgets exert a strong coercive force on originality and can

suffocate and destroy it by guiding it too rigidly. This is the reason why the most typical TV product is the serial, like *Dallas* or *Dynasty*, in which the director seems to be nothing more than a clever user (or servant) of those mighty tools: the economic and technical means.

The nature of culture — either alphabetic or audiovisual, free or enslaved — does not stem from historical determination, from the blind and impersonal evolution of science. The decisive factor will always be man's choice, the decision of powers that can drive society in one direction or another. If books and gadgets are caught in a deadly fight and the latter defeat the former, the responsibility will lie with those who chose to allow it to happen. But I do not think this Orwellian nightmare will really occur, for our fate, as writers and readers, is linked to that illness or vice called freedom, which humanity caught rather late in history and which affects a good part of mankind in apparently an incurable way.

Writing is a solitary business. Confronted with the piece of paper, pen in hand, so that what we call inspiration can pour out, one has no other choice but to isolate oneself from immediate life and plunge into the innermost universe of memory, nostalgia, secret desires, intuition, and instinct, all ingredients that nourish the creative imagination. The process that gives birth to a fiction is long, difficult, and fascinating. Although I have lived through this process many times since I wrote my first story, I have never really been able fully to understand it. I am not sure if this happens to all writers, but in my case at least, even though I try to be lucid when writing and attempt to exert a rational control over the story, characters, dialogues, and landscape that appear as the words flow out, I can never avoid a certain darkness that, like a shadow, escorts the conscious task of writing a novel.

The element that rushes out spontaneously from the most secret corner of one's personality imposes a special coloring upon the story one is trying to write, establishes hierarchies among the characters that sometimes subtly overturn our conscious intention, and adorns or impregnates that which we are narrating with a meaning or symbolism that, in some cases, not only does not coincide with our ideas but can even go as far as to substantially contradict them. The writer, the artist, is much more than mere intelligence, reason, ideas. He is also that shady region of one's personality that our consciousness is always repressing or ignoring. In the creative process, as in the magical exorcisms and healings of the primitive, that region manifests and imposes itself, restoring that completeness of the individual that, in almost all other social or private activities, appears incised, reduced only to its conscious counterpart.

Perhaps because they are born from the associated effort of reason and unreason, of intellect and intuition, of the free flight of fantasy and the dark intentions of the unconscious, the products of art and literature possess the continuity that allows them gracefully to cross the centuries and the barriers of geography and language, maintaining the vigor and power that time, instead of spoiling, increases. The peripeteia of the gods and the men of ancient Greece, which a blind poet recited three thousand years ago, still dazzle us today and, just like those remote ancestors who heard them

for the first time sung by the rhapsodies, we too are made to experience vicariously those ceremonies of passion and adventure that are eagerly desired by the human soul of every civilization. The fire that Shakespeare lit when he recreated in his tragedies and comedies the Elizabethan universe—from the plebeian street gossip with its fresco of picturesque types and its rich vulgarity, to the refined astuteness of the struggle for power of rulers and warriors, or the delicacies and torments of love and the feast of desire—still burns every time those stories materialize before us on a stage, embracing us, over time and distance, with their verbal enchantment. Brooding over the flesh-and-bone beings and the demons of his time, Shakespeare sketched certain images in which men of every era discover their own faces.

This miracle would not have been possible if the old poet from the beginnings of Greek civilization and the English playwright had not enjoyed, apart from their marvelous command of language and an incandescent imagination, the possibility of giving free rein to their private phantoms, letting them move around as they wished, and submitting to their dictates when confronted with the papyrus or the piece of paper.

The civilization to which both of them belonged were repressive ones that managed to maintain themselves by the discrimination and exploitation of the poor and the weak. But in the specific field in which Homer and Shakespeare operated, artistic creation—what we, making use of a modern concept, would call “permissibility”—was almost absolute. For the Greek, the poet was a spokesman of the gods, an intermediary from the other world in whom the artistic and religious values entwined in an indissoluble manner. How could a culture that, unlike ours, did not separate literature and art from morality and religion, the spirit from the body, have hindered the work of a man whose function was that of a priest and a seer as well as that of an illusionist? To that unconditional freedom that the poet enjoyed, the artist and the thinker—the communication bridges between men and gods, this world and the other—the Greek culture owes its particular development, the evolution that allowed it both to attain a prodigious richness of invention and knowledge in the fields of ideas, art, and literature, and to fix a certain pattern of beauty and thought that changed the history of the world, imposing upon it a rationality from which the entire technical and scientific progress as well as the gradual humanization of society were to derive.

It has been said that the history of Greece represents the victory of reason over the irrational straitjackets of pre-Christian civilizations. This may be true. But that triumphant awakening of reason over the coat of mail of superstitions and taboos that was to precipitate the world towards its unstoppable development would not have been possible without that latitude for thinking and creating that the Hellenic culture allowed its philosophers and artists. The triumph of reason followed the triumph of liberty. Perhaps for the first time in the course of human history the poet was not a man simply in charge of putting rhythm and music to what already existed—the legends and collective myths, the enthroned religion—and of illustrating in fables the established morality, but was instead an independent individual,

left to his own devices, authorized to explore the unknown using imagination, introspection, desire, and reason and to open the doors of the city to his private ghosts.

Shakespeare's genius could not have flourished without the unlimited freedom he had to show human passions (as Dr. Johnson wrote) with the impunity that he did. Not all of his contemporaries, however, enjoyed this freedom. The Tudor Era was not tolerant, but rather a despotic and brutal one, so much so that the historian G.B. Harrison, referring to the Vandalic destructions of statues, images, paintings, architectural works, and religious books that followed the first reform of Henry VIII, has compared that age to Germany and the Soviet Union under Hitler and Stalin. But drama was considered a vulgar and plebeian amusement, too far below the world of salons, academies, and libraries where the prevailing culture was produced and preserved, to be worthy of the punctilious control that was exerted over religious or political texts, for example. Power, in the age of Elizabeth I, prohibited English historical works and also shut down theaters on several occasions. But fortunately the dramatists were disdained and left in peace, so that—according to Harrison—the theater of London was the only place where the common man could hear direct and honest commentaries about life. No one made better use than Shakespeare of this accidental privilege granted to dramatists in Elizabethan England. The result is that fresco of man and his demons—political, social, religious, or sexual—that dazzles us because of its variety and subtlety, while enlightening us more than an army of psychologists, anthropologists, and sociologists on the vertiginous complexity of human nature. In the Shakespeare character, for the first time, flowered that man in whom, as Georges Bataille wrote, “contradictions immerse and empathize.”

As in literature, so in almost all fields of human affairs, freedom awakens in an unforeseen way, by accident or through the negligence of the dominant culture, that fails to legislate or organize certain areas of activity. Thanks to this exceptional privilege, individual initiative can copiously manifest itself there. The result is always, sooner or later, creative impetus, winds of change. The activity that, due to chance or to prejudices or distractions of those who exercise power, is let loose, develops very quickly, and begins to transform its surroundings.

That does not mean, of course, that once political, moral, or religious censorship vanishes, genius immediately flourishes. It only means that when freedom does not exist or is faint, human creativity shrinks and literature and art become poor.

Why was colonial literature in Latin America so clamorously mediocre that today we have to search very hard to find an author in those 300 years who deserves to be read? For every one Juana Ines de la Cruz or Inca Garcilaso de la Vega how many hundreds of indistinguishable poets and writers are there, abstruse chroniclers, incontinent dramatists without a single original idea? This literary scarcity is not gratuitous, nor can it be attributed to an intellectual deficiency common to our colonial versifiers. The compressing steamroller of ecclesiastic censorship prohibited and condemned the novel as impious. This prohibition of a literary form was a unique case in history. Every printed

work was the victim of an obsessive scrutiny for signs of heterodoxy, and the literary occupation became a depersonalized and aseptic ritual in which spontaneity had been suppressed. This servitude left the creator no alternative but to direct his imagination towards formal ostentation. As personal thinking was risky, even suicidal, the writer had to comply in the world of ideas with all the topics and stereotypes of dogma, and to invest his creative drive in what was decorative and external. This explains the formal extravagancies, often remarkable, of this conformist and predictable art.

Freedom of creation does not guarantee genius: it is merely the propitious ground in which it can germinate. On the other hand, when freedom does not exist, it is unlikely that germination will take place, because in artistic creation the entire personality must intervene, consciousness and unconsciousness, rational light and irrational tumult, searching for the unknown. Only the artistic work that is born from human totality, and that implies moral audacity as well as skill, transcends time and place. This rarely happens in repressive cultures, be they religious or ideological, in which due to censorship or self-censorship the creator must exert a systematic rational vigilance over what he writes so as not to transgress the limits of tolerance.

Now, the fact that freedom has been the motor of social and material as well as intellectual progress must not make us forget the tribute of misfortunes that it has also imposed on man, for we must bear in mind the high cost we have to pay in order to preserve it. For only in situations dealing with liberty is the essential complexity of human actions so flagrant—never wholly positive or negative, good or bad, but relatively one or the other, in doses often very difficult to weigh.

In the economic field, the same liberty that has impelled progress is also the source of inequalities, and can open up huge chasms between those who have a lot and those who do not. The curiosity and inventiveness that it fuels has allowed man to tame illness, explore the abysses of the sea, of matter and the body, and, transgressing the law of gravity, to sail the skies. But it has also allowed him to devise weapons that make any modern state a potential trigger of the kind of devastations and holocaust that make the efforts of Nero, Genghis Khan, or Tamerlane seem like playground amusements.

This somber paradox should make us consider the different ways in which science and literature have evolved. It is only in the former that the notion of “progress” has a distinct and chronological sense: the progressive discovery of knowledge that made previous discoveries obsolete and which brought better living conditions for man and increased his domination of nature. The advance of science, however, while it was pushing away illness, ignorance, and scarcity, accentuated the vulnerability of existence through the perfection of weaponry.

There is a law here that admits of no exceptions. Each period of scientific apogee has been preceded by the development of military technology and has seen wars in which the slaughter also progressed according to the number of victims and efficiency of destruction. From the skull smashed by the primitive anthropoid to the annihilation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, there is a long history in which

scientific development seems unable to achieve an equivalent progress in moral behavior. Civilization appears as a bicephalic animal. One of the heads stretches out to the sky—idealistic, generous, the eyes fixed on a pacific goal, a healthier, happier, and more compassionate life. The other head skims the ground, ruminating projects of power at any price, including that of the most atrocious destruction. In the nuclear era this process has reached its limit.

Every notion of “progress” is questionable in literature. The *Divine Comedy* may be better or worse than the *Odyssey*, and a reader may prefer Joyce’s *Ulysses* to *Don Quixote*. But no great literary work erases or impoverishes one which appeared ten centuries ago. That, though, is exactly what happens in the field of science, where chemistry abolished alchemy (or turned it into literature). The spirit of destruction, seemingly inherent in the creative ability of human beings, is not absent in literature. On the contrary, physical and moral violence are a permanent presence in poems, plays, and novels of all ages. The blood and corpses of the victims in literature are perhaps as numerous as those that would result from a nuclear apocalypse.

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There is a difference, of course. If there is a nuclear war, the human game as we know it is over. On the other hand, literary devastations and bloody orgies have produced only shakes, thrills, and a few orgasms among readers.

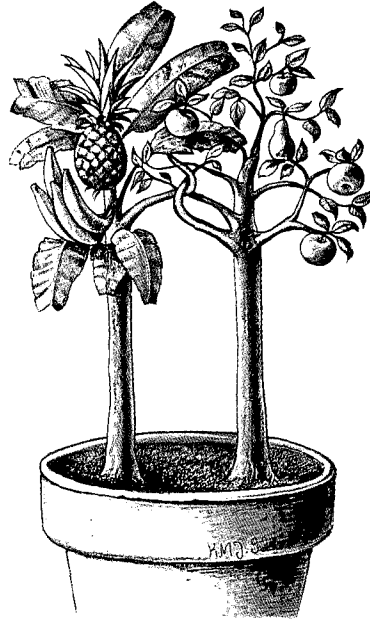
What I am trying to say is that since there is no way of eradicating man’s destructive drive, which is the price he pays for the faculty of invention, we should try to direct it towards books instead of gadgets. Literature can mitigate this drive without much risk. Maybe we should reconsider the impulse that turned science into the exclusive tool of progress, relegating poetry, stories, drama, and the novel to the secondary role of mere entertainment. Of course, literature is also a beautiful spell that provides us with some of that nourishment our desires long for in vain because we are condemned to want more than we have.

But literature is more than this. It is a reality where man can happily empty the obscure recesses of his spirit, giving free rein to his worst appetites, dreams, and obsessions, to those demons that go hand in hand with the angels inside him and which, if they were ever materialized, would make life impossible. In the ambiguous mist of literature, the spirit of destruction can operate with impunity, allow itself all the words, and at the same time it can be innocuous and even benign, thanks to the cathartic effect the meeting of secret devils has on a reader. Unlike scientific civilization, through which we have become more fragile than our ancestors were before they discovered fire and learned to fight the tiger, literary civilization produces men who are more impractical, passive, and dreamy. But such men would certainly be less dangerous to their fellowman than we have grown to be since our vote for the gadgets and vote against the book. ◊

From El Paso to Plymouth

Hispanic Contributions to American Culture

by Richard Estrada



Krystyna Jachniewicz

Last November, a delegation of citizens from the far West Texas border city of El Paso made the long journey to Plymouth, Massachusetts. The purpose of the El Pasoans' visit was to challenge Plymouth's long-held—and nearly universally accepted—claim that it was the site of the first Thanksgiving to be held on what is now United States soil.

"*Al contrario*," said the residents of El Paso. Instead of having taken place in Plymouth in 1620, the first Thanksgiving was held near El Paso 22 years previously, in 1598. Moreover, asserted the revisionists, the United States should honor a long-forgotten hero, Juan de Oñate, the leader of the caravan of brave Spanish settlers and conquistadores who not only celebrated the first American Thanksgiving but staged the first play ever performed on what is today American soil.

The historical mini-controversy soon fizzled out. But the story of Juan de Oñate and his expedition symbolizes an aspect of America's cultural identity that is destined to grow. As the contributions of Hispanics to North American history are brought into sharper focus, the United States has no choice but to ascertain who the Hispanics are. How did they get here, and how do they fit into the nation's consciousness? Inevitably, this leads to the question not only of assimilation, but of the real meaning of assimilation as the

world moves in the direction of greater global integration.

No region of the country is as influenced by Hispanic culture as the Southwest. The history of the Spanish and their Hispanic-Indian descendants in the Southwest began with the wanderings of Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca. The survivor of a shipwreck in the Gulf of Mexico, Cabeza de Vaca—along with two companions, one of whom was a black Moor—walked across Texas and northern Mexico beginning in 1536. Soon after Cabeza de Vaca's return to Spanish civilization in northern New Spain (modern-day Mexico), the first Spanish expedition into today's Southwest occurred between 1540 and 1542 under the leadership of Francisco Vázquez de Coronado. Members of this expedition trekked over modern-day Arizona, New Mexico, and Kansas, and were the first Europeans ever to witness the spectacular beauty of the Grand Canyon. One of my best friends—an El Pasoan, it so happens—claims to be a descendant of a member of this expedition.

In the 17th century, Spain proceeded to establish settlements along a north-south corridor that includes modern-day El Paso, Texas (historically more a part of New Mexico and Chihuahua than of Texas), and Albuquerque and Santa Fe, New Mexico. In the 18th century, settlements such as San Antonio, San Diego, San Francisco, and Los Angeles were established in modern-day Texas and California. Roman Catholic proselytizing always attended Spanish political conquest. To the historian Herbert Eugene Bolton, the Southwest was, therefore, the "rim of Christendom."

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