HOOVER INSTITUTION ARCHIVES, STANFORD UNIVERSITY

Samizdat, the practice of secretly publishing banned manuscripts in the Soviet Union, produced this easily concealed copy of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago*, a three-volume work circulated in the early 1970s that described the extent and horror of the Soviet concentration camp system.

BOOKS, GADGETS, AND FREEDOM

Mario Vargas Llosa was one of several Latin American and Soviet novelists who came to the Wilson Center as visiting scholars during the politically tumultuous decades at the end of the 20th century. In 2010 he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature for "his cartography of structures of power and his trenchant images of the individual's resistance, revolt, and defeat." In this essay from the *WQ*'s Spring 1987 issue, Vargas Llosa reflected on freedom's intimate connection to literary imagination.

BY **MARIO VARGAS LLOSA**

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BOOKS MEAN IDEAS, WORDS, FANTASY, the practice of intelligence. Nothing has pushed forward cultural life as much as the invention of printing, nor has anything contributed more to its democratization. From Gutenberg's times until today, the book has been the best propeller and depositor of knowledge, as well as an irreplaceable source of pleasure.

However, to many its future is uncertain. I recall with anguish a lecture I heard at Cambridge a few years ago. It was entitled "Literacy Is Doomed," and its thesis was that the alphabetic culture, the one based on writing and books, is perishing. According to the lecturer, audio-visual culture will soon replace it. The written word, and whatever it represents, is 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, because 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 congenital to the alphabetic system.

The lecturer maintained that all Third World countries, instead of persisting in those costly campaigns aimed at teaching their illiterate masses how to read and write, should introduce them to what will be the primary source of knowledge: the handling of machines.

The formula that the proud speaker used with a defying 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 an illiterate world, he reminded us that the alphabetic period in human history had in any case been short-lived. The lecturer did not think the alphabetic culture would totally vanish; nor did he wish it to do so. He forecast that the culture of the book would survive in certain university and social enclaves for the entertainment and benefit of the marginal group interested in producing and consuming it. The exponent of this thesis—which I have outlined very roughly—was not Marshall McLuhan, the Canadian prophet

who said that the book would "die" by 1980. (In fact, in 1980 it was McLuhan and his now forgotten Center for Culture and Technology that died.) The speaker was Sir Edmund Leach, eminent British social anthropologist, then provost of King's College. Coming from a distinguished mandarin of the alphabetic culture of our time, such statements should not be taken lightly. It is true that for many people the written word is becoming more and more dispensable. Books are less important even to the literate people of today (considering the time they devote to them and the effect books have on their lives) than they were to the literate people of the past.

We must be appalled at this, because although I doubt the prophecy of Professor Leach will come true, if it does it will be a disaster for humanity. Together with the books, and their writers and readers, something else will vanish: the culture of freedom.

MY PESSIMISM IS BASED ON TWO certainties. First, audio-visual culture is infinitely more easily controlled, manipulated, and degraded by power than is the written word. Because of the solitude in which it is born, the speed at which it can be reproduced and circulated, and its lasting mark on people's conscience, the written word has put up a stubborn resistance against being enslaved. With its demise, the submission of minds to power—to the powers—could be total.

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Second, the audio-visual product tends to limit imagination, to dull sensibility, and to create passive minds. I am not a retrograde, allergic to audio-visual culture. On the contrary. After literature I love nothing more than the cinema, and I deeply enjoy a good TV program. But even in the few countries such as England where TV has reached a high level of artistic creativity, the average TV program, that which sets the pattern, attempts to embrace the widest possible audience by appealing to the lowest common denominator.

The nature of culture—either literate or audio-visual, free or enslaved—does not stem from historical determination, from the blind evolution of science.

The decisive factor will always be man's choice. 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. And that may be their last choice.

In the specific field in which Homer and Shakespeare operated, that of artistic creation, what we would call "permissibility" was almost absolute.

But I do not think this Orwellian nightmare will really occur. Fortunately for us writers and readers, our fate is linked to that of freedom, that illness or vice caught by humanity rather late in history that affects a good part of mankind in an incurable way.

Even the earliest stirrings of the literary imagination are intimately bound up with freedom, and, in fact, the existence of such a connection is a necessary precondition for the timelessness of a literary work. Consider the *peripeteia* of the gods and the men of Ancient Greece, which a blind poet recited 3,000 years ago and which still dazzles us today. Just like those ancestors of our culture who heard them for the first time sung out by the rhapsodies, we too are vicariously made to experience 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.

This miracle would not have been possible if the old poets 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 a piece of paper.

The civilizations to which both of them belonged were repressive ones that managed to maintain themselves thanks to discrimination and the exploitation of the poor and the weak. But in the specific

field in which Homer and Shakespeare operated, that of artistic creation, what we, making use of a modem concept, would call "permissibility" was almost absolute.

To 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 Greek culture owes its particular development, that evolution that allowed it both to attain a prodigious richness of invention and knowledge in the field 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 of the West as well as the gradual humanization of society were to derive.

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 that which already existed—the legends and collective myths, the enthroned religion—and of illustrating in fables the established morality, but an independent individual, left to his own devices, authorized to explore the unknown using imagination, introspection, desire, and reason 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). The Tudor era, far from tolerant, was despotic and brutal. A close eye was kept on people's religious behavior, and any sign of heterodoxy on the part of Catholics or Puritans was punished with prison, torture, or death. 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 the theater of London was the only place where the common man could hear direct and honest commentaries about life.

No one, not even his contemporary Ben Jonson, who did get himself into trouble with the authorities because of his writings, made better use than Shakespeare of this accidental privilege—the freedom to create—granted to dramatists in Elizabethan England.

The result is that fresco of man and his demons—political, social, religious, or sexual—that dazzles and enlightens us because of its variety, subtlety, and insight into the complexity of human nature. In the 37 theatrical works of Shakespeare, the stiff symmetry that had served since the beginning of the Christian era to catalogue man and the human actions—whether good or bad, saint or sinner, dissolute or chaste, generous or greedy—was pulverized.

AS IN LITERATURE, AS 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, the same as we have seen incarnated in the works of Homer or Shakespeare: creative impetus, winds of change.

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

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Freedom of creation does not guarantee genius: It is merely the propitious ground in which it can germinate. In activities so distant from literature as industry and commerce, the eruptions of liberty, unleashed by circumstances foreign to the will of power, also produced such transcendental changes in social life as those that derived, in the world of intellect and sensibility, from the great artistic creations. A remarkable study by Professor Fernand Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism* (1967–79), devoted to the history of the Western world between the 15th and

18th centuries through the production of objects, tools, techniques, and exchange, instructs us on the astonishing mutation that the apparition of free trade and its stage, the market, brought about in society.

The notion of the sovereign individual is in fact very exotic and recent, limited to one civilization, in the course of a history in which a collectivist vision always prevailed.

The consequences are similar to those produced by freedom in art or science: energy, creativity, development of new techniques, proliferation of industries, gradual collapse of religious culture and growth of rationality, increase of communication between people and countries, weakening of the old social hierarchies established by name, title, or military function, and their replacement by new hierarchies determined by ownership and economic function. The blossoming of the city, the replacement of rural civilization by an urban one, is one result of this opening and multiplication of markets. But the most decisive consequence of the acceleration of history provoked by free production and exchange is the rise of the individual.

We tend to forget that this notion of the sovereign individual is in fact very exotic and recent, limited to one civilization, in the course of a history in which a collectivist vision always prevailed, albeit in different forms. Man had previously been not an individual but part of a herd, an undifferentiated mass, an anonymous group stamped with the feature of servitude.

It is only in modern times that man has emancipated himself from the gregarious placenta to which he had been tied since prehistoric times. This happened when the proliferation of uncontrolled economic, social, and artistic activities, in which the spontaneity and fantasy of the individual could flow with no barriers, encouraged the evolution of philosophical and political thinking all the way to that notion that breaks with the entire historical tradition of humanity: that of individual sovereignty. The ideas of social justice, egalitarian utopias, the rights of man, and, of course, the theories and practice of democracy, are the most fertile seeds of that doctrine that made the individual the center of the universe.

Reaching that point—the vision of the individual as an entity entitled to rights and duties around whom communal life must be organized—is without doubt the ethical peak of human history, which Benedetto Croce defined as the great achievement of liberty.

All civilizations and cultures have something to be proud of; they can all boast of having enriched—some less, some more, others a lot—the arts, technology, and the sciences. It is also possible to trace, in each one of them, here or there, in limited or abundant doses, the practice of freedom. But those enclaves in which individual initiative and whim could be exercised without restraint were never as numerous and constant as in the West.

This probably accounts for the West's might, its growth, and the strength with which it imposed itself, overcame or transubstantiated other cultures with its own customs, beliefs, institutions, and values, and the fact that, little by little, sometimes through force, sometimes through commerce, sometimes through both combined, it managed to destroy, assimilate, or impregnate these other cultures.

Of course, the fact that freedom has been the motor of social and material progress must not make us forget the tribute of misfortunes that it has imposed on man. Liberty meant, if not abolition of injustice and political abuse, at least its radical reduction and the awareness of the need to fight such abuses. But we must bear in mind the high cost we have to pay in order to preserve it.

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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 have nothing. The curiosity and inventiveness that it fuels have allowed man to tame illness; explore the abyss of the sea, of matter, and of 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 for the kind of devastation and holocaust that makes the efforts of Nero or Genghis Khan seem like playground amusements.

It is not only the sleep of reason that can engender monsters, as Goya wrote in one of his etchings. Lucid, vigilant reason, when it flows freely, is just as capable of formulating impeccable theories on the inequality of human races; justifying slavery; proving the inferiority of women, the black, or the yellow, the innate evil of the Jew; legitimizing the extermination of the heretic; and supporting conquest, colonialism, and war between nations or classes. In spite of all its dangers, of all the catastrophes that its use and abuse can produce, there is no doubt that most individuals and peoples choose liberty whenever they have the chance. When they do not, they seem ready to face the worst sacrifices to achieve it.

There are, obviously, exceptions. Its enemies tend to be transitory, enemies only until they realize that when freedom vanishes, the poverty and grayness of life are such that they became too high a price for the supposed benefits of suppressing it: law and order, in the case of authoritarian dictatorships; the abolition of classes and the establishment of collectivist equality in the case of totalitarian ones; or the imposition of a dogma, in the case of religious dictatorships. Are the people of Iran satisfied with the theocratic despotism of the imams that has already caused in that country more death and suffering than the corrupted autocracy of the shah? Apparently, yes. There is no other way to explain the apparent stability of the regime, nor can one conceive otherwise of the burning zeal with which children, men, and elderly people of ancient Persia run into that nonsensical slaughter of the war against Iraq. Religious faith, if fanatically followed, can make of liberty something worthless and even give emotional fulfillment, an illusion of happiness that freedom can hardly match. If we define happiness as a state of harmony between man's feelings and the reality in which he lives, yes, no doubt a people under chains can be happier—or less unhappy—than a free people.

Intellectuals, too, have demonstrated their impatience with freedom. It is the intellectual, after all, who gave birth to those theories that attempt to show that freedom is relative, a formal privilege linked to power and fortune, a mirage that the dominant minorities use to disguise the exploitation of the masses. Curiously enough, once that liberty they call fictitious and fallacious is suppressed, either by a right-wing military dictatorship or by a Marxist revolution, and once they discover that they are the first victims when it fades away, that without this mirage their own work becomes

a frustration, and that the cause of true justice does not move forward an inch without it, the artists and intellectuals turn into its most zealous defenders.

The Latin American people in their political choices have generally shown greater foresight than a goodly number of our intellectuals.

This is a phenomenon of our time that should make us stop and think: In free countries, intellectuals and artists committed to totalitarianism abound, while in societies under repression, either from the Left or the Right, intellectuals and artists are at the forefront of the struggle for freedom. (Chile and Poland are good examples.)

In Europe, the magnetism with which the Marxist-Leninist utopia attracted so many intellectuals after World War II has faded under the corrosive effect of the testimonies by Soviet dissidents about the reality of the Gulag and the nomenklatura. Instructive, too, is the rebellion of East European workers against regimes that have established dictatorships in the name of a future classless society and have improved thought censorship and control of the individual to levels of artistic perfection. The European intellectual is today, on the whole, a lucid critic of totalitarianism and has resigned himself to admitting that the mediocre liberal democracies—so boring and lacking in sex appeal compared to the splendid revolutionary apocalypse—provide, despite their handicaps, more humane ways of life, and make societies not only freer but also more prosperous.

This admission, nonetheless, is often contradicted by the solidarity of the European intellectual with the totalitarian cause in Third World countries—as if what is bad for the English or Hungarians, or the French or the Dutch—could be good for Cubans or Peruvians. Or as if their misery and exploitation made men in underdeveloped countries ineligible for political freedom. The truth is that the Latin American people in their political choices have generally shown greater foresight than a goodly number of our intellectuals.

Yes, there are monstrous inequalities; in our countries poverty is a recurrent nightmare, all the way from the Rio Grande to the Straits of Magellan; and as far as education, health, employment, and justice go, there is much to

accomplish. But, at the same time, Latin Americans say that, unlike what happened only a few decades ago in Europe, or what happens today in the Middle or Far East and in Africa, our people have seldom succumbed to the fascination of despotism. Whenever asked, they have resolutely chosen freedom.

THE LESSON IS ALL TOO CLEAR. THE first to learn it should be those who pretend to write in the name of the masses. Despite hunger, economic injustice, and misfortune, our people have not lost their appetite for liberty and are not prepared to follow those who would so rashly do away with it.

But what part, specifically, can books play in the continuing struggle for freedom, particularly today, when that struggle involves nothing less than the potential destruction of all civilized life? The facts are grim, however we weigh them. Consider one example. On one side of the border that separates Western from Eastern Europe, 300 Soviet SS-20 missiles lie in underground shelters. Each one contains three independent nuclear warheads and has an impact precision of 200 to 300 meters over a range of 3,000 kilometers. On the other side of the frontier, in the NATO bases, 108 Pershing II and 464 cruise missiles have been set up, capable of hitting any target seven or eight minutes after being launched.

This somber perspective should make us consider the different ways in which science and literature have evolved. It is only in science, after all, that the notion of "progress" has a distinct chronological sense: the progressive discovery of knowledge that made previous discoveries obsolete and 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 human 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 in terms of the number of victims and in the 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.

Any 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 one that appeared 10 centuries before. This, however, 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 is a permanent presence in poems, plays, and novels in all ages.

There is a difference, of course. If the SS-20s and Pershing IIs are launched, the human game as we know it is over. On the other hand, all the literary devastations and bloody orgies have produced only shakes, thrills, yawns, 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 toward books instead of gadgets. Literature can mitigate this drive without much risk. We should reconsider the impulse that turned science into the tool of progress, relegating poetry, stories, drama, and the novel to the secondary role of mere entertainment.

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 that, if they were materialized, would make life impossible. In the ambiguous mist of literature, the spirit of destruction can operate with impunity. Unlike the scientific civilization that has made us more fragile than our ancestors were before they learned to fight the tiger, under a literary civilization more impractical, passive, and dreamy men would be born. But at least these men would be less dangerous to their fellows than we have grown to be since we voted for the gadgets and against the book. Let us bear this in mind if we ever get a second choice. ■

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MARIO VARGAS LLOSA, the 2010 Nobel laureate in literature, is the author of novels, plays, and other writings, including *Conversation in the Cathedral* (1975), *The War of the End of the World* (1984), and *The Feast of the Goat* (2001). He was a Wilson Center fellow in 1980.