

electricity represents just 20 percent of U.S. consumption (countries such as France and Lithuania, by comparison, get over 70 percent of their electricity from nuclear plants), Meserve says the U.S. nuclear industry “is by far the largest commercial nuclear power program in the world.” About one-quarter of the world’s nuclear plants are in the United States.

Meserve thinks the United States may be ready to move away from its reliance on coal and natural gas for electricity in favor of nuclear power. One compelling factor is cost: The average production cost of electricity from nuclear plants was about 1.71 cents per kWh in 1999. That is less than the cost of electricity from either coal or natural gas, both finite fuel sources that contribute to greenhouse gas emissions. Price deregulation of electricity, along with the fact that the high capital costs of many older plants have now been largely repaid, has helped make nuclear competitive. But the plants have also become much more efficient. One reason: Operating capacity grew from 60 percent to 90 percent during the 1990s. Since most plants need to be shut down for refueling every few years, says Meserve, this capacity figure “is only slightly less than the practical maximum.” New

plants might be even more efficient. Researchers are working on three basic designs, all smaller and employing different approaches. Some, for example, are cooled by helium rather than water.

The main cloud hanging over all this optimism is the continuing problem of nuclear waste. Right now, spent fuel is kept in giant casks at each plant site, cooled by air convection. Meserve pronounces this storage system safe, but plants are running out of waste storage space. The Department of Energy has selected Nevada’s Yucca Mountain as the nation’s repository for nuclear waste, a choice endorsed by President George Bush and supported by a recent resolution in the House of Representatives. And even though Nevada’s state officials declare that they intend “to litigate at every available opportunity” to block the project, there seems little chance they can succeed.

Concerns over waste and lingering public nervousness after Three Mile Island and Chernobyl still color the public image of the nuclear power industry. But ultimately, as older plants near the end of their useful lives, the United States will have to decide whether it wants to capitalize on the advantages of nuclear power.

ARTS & LETTERS

Lost in the Corridors

“The Future in Your Bones: C. P. Snow (1905–80)” by George Watson, in *The Hudson Review* (Winter 2002), 684 Park Ave., New York, N.Y. 10021.

British scientist-turned-novelist C. P. Snow (1905–80) is still remembered for his division of the intellectual world into “two cultures,” the scientific and the literary, and for his phrase “corridors of power,” which became a cliché even before his 1964 novel of that title was published. Snow fervently believed that scientists—and he himself—had, in another favorite phrase, “the future in their bones.” But he was quite wrong about that, writes Watson, a Fellow of St. John’s College, Cambridge University.

Born in Leicester, in the English Midlands, the son of a clerk in a shoe factory, Snow earned a doctorate in physics at

Cambridge in 1930. But his early research on infrared spectroscopy went awry. The failed scientist turned to college administration at Cambridge and to novel writing. In 1939 he began a career in public life, joining a Royal Society group organized to harness British science to the war effort. The next year, his novel *Strangers and Brothers* appeared, and its title became the name for his long series of novels about the administration of power in contemporary Britain.

“The novels sold,” Watson notes, “and probably achieved something of their didactic intention, which was to inform the world about how power interacts with personality,

even among the elite—with foibles, private hates and love. It was a very Trollopian vision of the world, as Snow knew: he was rewriting [Anthony] Trollope's Palliser novels a century on." Like Trollope (and unlike most novelists), Snow wrote about the world of work. But he lacked the great 19th-century novelist's ear for dialogue, and his prose did not sing.

Snow also "loved to strike" his un-Trollopian note about the future, Watson observes. "Like [H. G.] Wells and Aldous Huxley, he foresaw a brave new world: a planned economy directed by scientists, technicians, and planners, along with those

who had learned how to listen to them." Although a kind man himself, says Watson, the novelist saw life as "a power-game" and was "ideologically ruthless." Snow was "a highly conservative Communist," who believed in the necessity of a one-party state to control "the infinite forces of communication and production about to be unleashed by technology. The free market, for Snow, was not even an option. Nor was democracy."

As it turned out, observes Watson, the bones of "Lord Corridor of Power" (as one wag called him when he was made a peer in 1964) held not the future but the past.

Two Elements of Style

"From *Letters to a Young Novelist*" by Mario Vargas Llosa, in *Partisan Review* (No. 2, 2002), 236 Bay State Rd., Boston, Mass. 02215.

To succeed, a novelist must create a fiction that "liberates itself from its creator and real life, and impresses itself on the reader as an autonomous reality." And how does one accomplish that? In significant part through that mysterious thing called style, writes Vargas Llosa, the Peruvian novelist and one-time presidential candidate.

A writer's style must, in Vargas Llosa's view, have two elements: "internal coherence" and "essentiality." Molly Bloom's famous monologue at the end of *Ulysses*, for example, is incoherent. James Joyce's "power to bewitch derives from a prose that is seemingly ragged and fragmented, but beneath its unruly and anarchic surface retains a rigorous coherence, a structural consistency that follows a model or original system of rules and principles from which it never deviates."

A style need not be pleasant in order to succeed. Vargas Llosa is irritated by Louis-Ferdinand Céline's "short, stuttering little sentences, plagued with ellipses and packed with exclamations and slang," but novels such as *Voyage to the End of the Night* are finally hypnotic. Alejo Carpentier, "one of the greatest novelists of the Spanish language," writes in an entirely different style, rife with "stiffness" and "bookish mannerisms," yet his prose has a saving coherence. "His style has a conviction that makes readers feel that

he tells the story the only way it could be told: in *these* words, phrases, and rhythms."

"Essentiality," the second element of style, is much harder for Vargas Llosa to define. It is easier to describe its opposite: a style that makes us "conscious of reading something alien, not experiencing the story alongside its characters and sharing it with them." It creates "a fissure that exposes all the artifice and arbitrariness that fiction depends on." Readers "realize that the same stories, told in a different way or in other words, would be better (which in literary terms simply means more persuasive.)"

Jorge Luis Borges, for example, has an unmistakable style, cold, elegant, almost intellectual, which has exerted a great, and to Vargas Llosa's mind unfortunate, influence on his many epigones. In their hands, Borges's style fails to ring true. "Precisely because it is essential, Borges's style is inimitable." Gabriel García Márquez writes in a very different but no less essential style, bringing almost as many imitators to grief.

The paradox is that Vargas Llosa thinks writers can develop a style only by endlessly reading other novelists, by seeing William Faulkner develop his own style between his maiden novel *Mosquitoes* and his subsequent *Flags in the Dust*. Then they must put all this aside and search for their own voice.