

BOOK REVIEWS

Raymond Leslie Williams

MARIO VARGAS LLOSA

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Reviewed by George R. McMurray

Raymond Williams's monograph on Peru's best writer is the second to appear in English in two years, the other one being Dick Gerdes's *Mario Vargas Llosa* (Twayne Publishers, 1985). Williams divides his study into seven chapters, the first of which records the major events of Vargas Llosa's life as well as his place in contemporary Latin American fiction. The remaining chapters discuss the author's works in chronological order, except for the final chapter, which treats not only his last novel but also his essays and theater.

In addition to plot summaries and themes, Williams deals with techniques and language, focusing frequently on how these elements shape the reader's response. On several occasions he also alludes to heteroglossia, Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the "many-langued discourse" (p. 179), which in *La ciudad y los perros*, for example, is illustrated by the discourses of thought, oral speech, and literary writing. *La casa verde* is described as a combination of novel and romance, the latter illustrated by mythical or archetypal characters such as Anselmo and Fushía. The languages of this text are the dialogues of Christian missionaries, the Champs of La Mangachería, and the merchants of Santa María de Nieva.

According to Williams, *Conversación en La Catedral* is an epic whose examination of an entire society makes it a "total novel." Moreover, the telescoping of dialogues, a technique Vargas Llosa pioneered, creates the impression of immediacy by making the reader's experience of events, both past and present, more direct and simultaneous. Unlike many critics, Williams does not consider this a predominantly political novel, but rather a story of individual lives deeply affected by political circumstances. *Pantaleón y las visitadoras* and *La tía Julia y el escribidor* are presented as Vargas Llosa's most humorous works, the former a parody of military organization and the latter a soap opera in which the author exorcises one of his demons, the Peruvian reader of melodramas. An example of self-conscious fiction, *La tía Julia* also parodies Vargas Llosa in its portrayal of Pedro Camacho, the fanatically disciplined writer.

In Williams's opinion *La guerra del fin del mundo* is Vargas Llosa's masterpiece. A traditional novel in the manner of Balzac and Tolstoy (two of Vargas Llosa's favorite authors), *La guerra* emerges as a story of conflict between ideologies, individuals, and languages, the latter being those of Christianity and the Enlightenment. Most of the novel is told by an omniscient narrator, but Vargas Llosa makes frequent use of focalisers to intensify and vary the reader's experience.

Although in his final chapter Williams discusses at some length Vargas Llosa's books on Flaubert and García Márquez, he views the Peruvian's theater and last novel as relatively minor portions of his total production. Both plays (*La señorita de Tacna* and *Kathie y el hipopótamo*) dramatize the complex relationship between life and fiction, whereas *La historia de Mayta* in all probability was inspired by the recent political violence in Peru.

Williams displays a careful reading of Vargas Llosa's oeuvre and as a result has written an acute critical overview for both the general public and the specialist. Also of interest in this volume are the author's insightful interpretations based on Bakhtin's theories and Vargas Llosa's literary essays.