

## The Peruvian Candidate

HUGH THOMAS

**A** BRILLIANT and successful novelist becomes so famous in his country that he turns to politics. A great speech opposing the nationalization of banks makes him an obvious leader of a new alliance of parties, some new, some old. He becomes the presidential candidate. Though the governing party hates him and tries an extraordinary number of dirty tricks against him, for months he is the leader in the polls. He is the first political leader to seem to ride to power on a distrust of power, derived from a careful reading of Aron, Popper, Hayek, Friedman, even Nozick. Then the presidency is stolen from him by a last-minute surge of support by the poor for an unknown Japanese immigrant. The novelist leaves for Paris, his country headed for ruin. But he, we know, will survive and prosper, for Paris has always been for him a mecca of the imagination, al-

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*A Fish in Water: A Memoir, by Mario Vargas Llosa, translated by Helen Lane (Farrar, Straus, 532 pp., \$25)*

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ways "a moving spiritual and aesthetic experience, like burying oneself in a great book." And he had, too, "from an early age . . . that ability to take leave of everything around me, to live in a world of fantasy, to recreate through imagination the make-believe stories that held me spellbound."

A scenario like this would be enough to destroy any normal writer. The events are too many, too confusing, too breathtaking. Mario Vargas Llosa rises triumphantly to the unprecedented challenge. His memoir is a dazzling performance, one of his very best books, full of curious, even surreal, events such as the last-minute intervention of the archbishop of Lima at Vargas Llosa's house after his defeat in the first round of the election.

The success of the book is even more remarkable since the author has chosen to interweave with his descrip-

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tions of his political life in the 1980s and 1990s an account of his own upbringing, mostly in Piura in northern



Roman Genn

Peru. This is followed by the fascinating story of his early life in Lima, his horrible times with his jealous and brutal father, his first loves and his first reading (the influence of Dumas is of particular interest). Then there are his first jobs, of which he once had seven at the same time. The description of life on the newspaper *La Crónica* is splendid, particularly the passages where he describes working with the chief crime reporter, Becerrita, a figure straight from Balzac, "with his vitriolic little eyes, grainy from lack of sleep, perpetually watchful, his shiny suits pressed countless times, reeking of tobacco and sweat

. . . a citizen of Hell, for whom the underworld haunts of the city held no secrets."

Equally to the point is the paragraph on the swan song of the Peruvian brothel—an event that led the way, in the author's opinion, to "the banalization of sex . . . stripped of mystery and taboos . . . a (mere) gymnastic exercise, a temporary diversion," something very different from "the central mystery of life," of which the brothel was the temple.

My only complaint about the book is that there is, as it were, a large gap in the middle. The childhood-and-youth section ends with the departure of Vargas Llosa with his first wife, his aunt Julia, for Paris in 1958; and his launching of the Freedom movement after the great meeting protesting against the Socialist Party in 1987. What, the reader wants urgently to know, happened in between? Of course, the reader of Vargas Llosa's other works knows all about Aunt Julia, and most of us know that, at some point in the Sixties, perhaps in London, Vargas Llosa ceased to support the Left. The author became famous nationally and internationally. But what about the end of his marriage with Julia, his second marriage, with his cousin Patricia, who plays quite a part in the account of the campaign of 1991? How long did he live in Paris? Etc. Of course, all this will presumably be material for another volume of memoirs, doubtless just as interesting, though for drama, irony, and unexpected events this volume will be hard to beat.

One of the charms of this book is the pictures given of people who influenced Mario Vargas Llosa at different stages in his career. The heroes include the delightful Llosa family, so much of a contrast with the Vargases, even though the author's father in the end emerges as an impoverished worker in the United States, never taking a penny from his successful son. Among remote relations on his mother's side was Uncle José Luis—well-spoken, bow-tied, his hat with ribbon-bound brim, and his short legs wide apart—who became suddenly and briefly president of the republic in the Forties. There is a quick portrait of the honest and generous anthropologist Efraim Morote Best, later a guru of the murderous Shining Path movement. Then there is the great scholar



and historian, later foreign minister Porras Barrenechea, for whom the author worked as a research assistant, and who, despite years of labor, never finished his study of the conquest by Pizarro. Another fine passage is Vargas Llosa's brooding on why so many intellectuals take up left-wing attitudes: for the great majority of them, such beliefs "were only a strategy to get ahead." One of these opportunists confirmed that to a friend: "Tell Mario not to pay attention to the things that I am declaring against him, because they represent only favorable opportunities for me."

The pictures of Peruvian life and tragedy are graphic and interesting. Vargas Llosa's visit to Amazonia in 1958 is particularly well done. So is the conversion of the campaign into a battle between Catholics and Evangelicals, as is the sudden outburst of racism among Vargas Llosa's middle-class supporters once they realized that their horrified candidate might be

beaten by Alberto Fujimori, a candidate whose ancestors were not buried in Peru and whose Spanish was so rough. The author describes very well—a paragraph, no more—how he campaigned in Ayacucho to find a horde of people who seemed completely savage advancing upon him.

It is a mark of a great writer to make what in other hands would be minor matters seem universally interesting. So it is here, with countless impressions of fascinating and improbable encounters as well as curious ones. For example, Vargas Llosa's realization that politics, "real politics, not the kind one reads and writes about . . . has little to do with ideas, values, and imagination . . . and everything to do with maneuvers, intrigues, plots, paranoias, betrayals, a great deal of calculation, no little cynicism, and every kind of con game." This is a great book. I urge all who read this review to buy it immediately. They may think I have understated its merits. □

Communion, by 15 he found that nobody could explain the meaning of the word "God" and was caught reading a socialist pamphlet in divinity lesson. He nevertheless always scrupulously avoided advertising his lack of belief, acknowledged the role of Christianity in developing the moral tradition underlying markets, and continued ambivalently to hold to the view that of all denominations Catholicism remained the "true article."

At school he fell foul of a succession of teachers, consistently neglected homework, even failing exams and having to repeat the fourth year. He obligingly offers his own report: "intelligent but lazy . . . a voracious reader," adding "I do not think I was then of the 'intellectual' type . . . !" Later, with equally innocent candor, he reveals as a surprising "self-discovery," from active war service and mountaineering, that he was "in a sense, fearless physically."

Of officers' school in 1917 he says it was "the first time I really proved to myself (what I seem never to have seriously doubted) that if I really wanted I could, without much effort, do as well as the best of my fellows." Back from the war, he marvels at his newfound energy after recovering from malaria; he went dancing most evenings and worked hard at several branches of study, for which he claims no credit and which he attributes to "a certain stability."

There follow the most absorbing revelations of his scholarly development in the intellectual ferment of Vienna, where students still repaired to coffee shops, endlessly discussing lectures and the two dominant topics, Marxism and psychoanalysis. In the background were often violent confrontations between Socialists, Communists, and Catholics, which brought Hayek into active party politics for the only time in his life, helping organize a German Democratic Party as what he might later have been inclined to denounce as "the middle way."

After toying with psychology, he settled for economics, law, and languages to open the way to the diplomatic service, followed by an academic or political appointment. Among the now familiar names of the Austrian School, Hayek compares and contrasts such greats as Menger, Böhm-Bawerk, and von Wieser, as well as near contemporaries such as von Mises (his chief

## Out of Austria

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FOR the growing legion of Hayek fans this charming volume is the next best thing to bringing the great man back from the dead for a chat about old campaigns and famous victories. How rare, for this reviewer at least, to wish a book were twice or three times as long. As it is, I rather resented that 35 of 155 pages

*Hayek on Hayek, edited by Stephen Kresge and Lief Wenar (Chicago, 200 pp., \$27.50)*

of text were taken up by a rather pretentious, meandering introduction which may overwhelm the layman without satisfying the *cognoscente*.

Anyone who has even contemplated venturing into the swamps of autobiography might privately acknowledge that, if not vanity, then self-indulgence is at least a large part of the motivation. Of such human vices Hayek hereby stands acquitted. To outsiders a fearsome intellectual, he certainly revealed himself to friends as an in-

tensely human individual, but with more humility than most. Indeed, the autobiographical notes that form the core of *Hayek on Hayek* (supplemented by extracts from unpublished recorded interviews, now called "oral archives") were never intended for publication but as an aid to whoever was saddled in the future with preparing a sketch of his life, which election to the British Academy in 1945 had made inevitable. Since little would then be known of his early days, Hayek announces at the outset his intention of helping "whoever will have to undertake the ungrateful task of discovering interesting facts about an externally rather uneventful life."

At once the reader is plunged into the happy family life of a comfortably-off Viennese municipal doctor with a passion for systematic botany which alerted the young "Fritz" to the "puzzle of the existence of clearly defined classes," which in turn shifted his interest around the age of 16 to man and evolution. His parents, being lapsed Roman Catholics, never took him to church and, after a religious phase at 10 when he made confessions and took

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