

Mario Vargas Llosa's New Book and Walter J. Ong's Thought

Thomas J. Farrell
Professor Emeritus in Writing Studies
University of Minnesota Duluth
tfarrell@d.umn.edu

The Peruvian novelist Mario Vargas Llosa, who was born in 1936, won the Nobel Prize in literature in 2010.

In 2012, the Nobel Prize winning novelist published a short collection of essays in Spanish, which has now been published in 2015 in English as *Notes on the Death of Culture: Essays on Spectacle and Society*, translated by John King.

In the present essay, I will undertake to highlight certain points from his book and discuss them, and then I will discuss his thought in connection with the American Jesuit cultural historian and theorist Walter J. Ong's thought.

If you were born and raised in Peru, you might understandably be interested in democracy as a form of government and in Karl Popper's ideas about an open society, as Vargas Llosa is. But he has lived not only in Peru, but also in Bolivia, France, and the United Kingdom. He is quite conversant with French theory, which he discusses critically in this book.

Vargas Llosa works in just enough autobiographical reflections to give the essays a deeply personal flavor. From a Roman Catholic background, he reports that he has lost his religious faith (page 191). But he is not anti-religion (see pages 31-34 and 153-196) -- as are many American academics and journalists today, including the African American journalist Ta-Nehisi Coates in his new book *Between the World and Me* (2015).

Vargas Llosa's multi-faceted critique of our contemporary global popular culture today strikingly resembles the American sociologist David Riesman's critique of the then-emerging American popular culture in his widely known book *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character* (1950). Briefly, Riesman works with the terminology of (1) outer-directed persons (also known as tradition-directed), (2) inner-directed persons, and (3) other-directed persons.

In Riesman's terminology, Vargas Llosa is undoubtedly an inner-directed person himself, and he is in effect criticizing what Riesman terms other-directed persons in popular culture.

Because Vargas Llosa prefers to celebrate democracy and Popper's ideas about an open society, Vargas Llosa repeatedly criticizes authoritarian governments and certain other manifestations of authoritarianism. But the people characterized by Riesman as outer-directed (or tradition-directed) tend toward a group-centered authoritarianism. Basically, this age-old orientation set up the contrasting orientation of inner-directedness.

Now, Ong accepts Riesman's terminology about both outer-directed and inner-directed persons, and Ong sees inner-directedness as rising to unprecedented prominence in the prestige culture in the Age of Print that emerged historically in Western culture in the centuries after the Gutenberg printing press emerged in the 1450s. Of course there were also ancient and medieval manifestations of inner-directedness.

However, even though both Riesman and Ong were undoubtedly inner-directed persons themselves, Ong does not tend to being as critical as Riesman is of so-called other-directedness that Riesman detected as emerging in American popular culture. To be sure, Ong for understanding reasons is not uncritical of American popular culture. But he resists Riesman's sweeping criticism of so-called other-directedness, which Riesman fears might tend toward authoritarianism.

Now, Vargas Llosa says that the essays in his book are "anchored in the realm of culture, understood not as mere epiphenomenon of social and economic life, but as an autonomous reality, made up of ideas, aesthetic and ethical values, and works of art and literature that interact with the rest of social existence, and that are often not mere reflections, but rather the wellsprings, of social, economic, political and even religious phenomena" (page 14).

Whew! Big agenda.

But isn't there a wee bit of tension in claiming that the realm of culture as an autonomous reality involves the wellsprings of social, economic, political and even religious phenomena? Doesn't the imagery of "wellsprings" imply a transit from an autonomous reality to a social reality? If so, just how does this transit proceed – how does it occur?

Now, as a novelist and essayist, Vargas Llosa considers himself to be a committed public intellectual. The British novelists and essayists Virginia Woolf, Aldous Huxley, and George Orwell were also committed public intellectuals. For example, Woolf was a public intellectual committed to promoting her feminist and pacifist views in her short book *Three Guineas* (1938). In a similar way, Vargas Llosa is committed to promoting democracy as a form of government and Popper's ideas about an open society in his short book. In addition, Vargas Llosa is committed to promoting and valuing the creative imagination expressed in serious literary works and in other works of art – "profound works of imagination" (page 87).

Historically, by the standards of their various times, profound works of imagination may have contributed in one way or another to "interact[ing] with the rest of social existence" "not [as] mere reflections, but rather [as] the wellsprings of social, economic, political and even religious phenomena." In a certain sense, each creative artist involved in producing profound works of imagination is a kind of prophet to his or her group, and his or her works are in a sense prophetic.

But Vargas Llosa seems to hold out for artists who produce profound works of imagination – over against more superficial works of imagination such as those found in advertising.

Vargas Llosa mentions the brutality involved in World War I and World War II and “the Nazi crematoriums and the Soviet Gulag” (page 8). But all the profound works of imagination did not stop all of that brutality. Does that mean that we need profound works of imagination that explore the depths of the human psyche more deeply and more profoundly?

C. G. Jung notes that brutality is the flip side of sentimentality. If this is correct, then sentimentality needs to be countered to hold brutality in check and perhaps even stop it.

But does Vargas Llosa have a plan for countering sentimentality?

Nostalgia for the past is a form of sentimentality that Vargas Llosa seems to indulge in. He says, “In every historical period, up to our own, there were cultured and uncultured people, and, between these two extremes, there were people who were more or less cultured and more or less uncultured, and this classification was quite clear the world over because there was a shared system of values and cultural criteria, and shared ways of thinking, judging and behaving” (pages 57-58) – including of course shared anti-Semitism and racism and sexism.

Elsewhere, Vargas Llosa says that “the idea of culture never implied any given quantity of knowledge, but rather a certain quality and sensitivity” (page 12).

But doesn't the very existence of the Nobel Prize in literature, which Vargas Llosa himself won in 2010, show that there are still today certain cultured people who recognize and reward cultured authors of serious literature – such as Vargas Llosa himself?

But Vargas Llosa to the contrary notwithstanding, there has been no golden age in the past.

Besides that, is there any compelling evidence that “a certain [cultured] quality and sensitivity” somehow contributes to enabling those people who have it to overcome their culturally conditioned tendencies toward anti-Semitism and racism and sexism – or toward brutality or even toward sentimentality?

Besides that, is Vargas Llosa himself just advancing “the myth that humanities humanize” that he reports has been rejected by contemporary theory (page 9)? If contemporary theory is rightly claims that the claim that the humanities humanize is just a myth, then should the humanities be abolished from formal education? But if the humanities should not be abolished from formal education, then what reasons can be advanced for retaining the humanities in formal education?

In a similar vein, if the humanities should be abolished from formal education, should all creative artists cease and desist from producing “profound works of imagination” – and not so profound works of imagination? But if creative artists should not stop producing works, what reasons can be advanced for having them continue to produce works?

Now, Jung himself does not set forth a specific plan for countering sentimentality and thereby presumably holding brutality in check and perhaps stopping it. However, his more general plan for advancing psycho-spiritual growth involves integrating “shadow” material into one's ego-consciousness. But this is far easier said than done.

Now, Vargas Llosa's concern with values and valuing and valuation centering on valuing profound works of imagination lead him to characterize the process of taking in and assimilating profound works of imagination as involving a dialogue (page 66). However, in his various expressions of enthusiasm for democracy and for Popper's ideas about an open society, he does not refer to dialogue among persons in a democracy in an open society.

In theory, an open society without dialogue would involve an atomistic view of the people in the supposedly open society – and thereby would seem to encourage and endorse individualism over against what the late Jewish American Buber scholar Maurice Friedman refers to as a culture of otherness. A culture of otherness depends on the spirit of dialogue to sustain it. By contrast, what Friedman refers to as a community of affinity depends on like-minded people. In theory, the Roman Catholic Church involves a community of like-minded people, a community of affinity, not a community of otherness.

By definition, a community of otherness involves recognition and acceptance of people whose views are different from one's own views and from one another's views – in short, heterogeneity, rather than affinity. Figuratively speaking, a community of otherness would be like a kind of United Nations of different views.

The atomistic view of people tends to favor the spirit of individualism that Pope Francis criticizes in his recent encyclical (2015) in connection with the technocratic paradigm. In the United States, the atomistic view of people and its concomitant spirit of individualism are favored by economic libertarians such as the Koch brothers. In addition, to criticizing excessive individualism, the pope endorses dialogue.

In Ong's massively researched book *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue: From the Art of Discourse to the Art of Reason* (1958), Ong advertises his interest in dialogue in the title of his book. He never tired of endorsing I-thou dialogue.

I suspect that many Americans have grown up in what Friedman describes as a community of affinity. At the grassroots level, many American churches serve as communities of affinity for the church members.

In her book *Heretic: Why Islam Needs a Reformation Now* (2015), Ayaan Hirsi Ali characterizes certain Muslim immigrants to non-Muslim countries today as preferring "cultural cocoons" (pages 20). But many immigrants to the United States in the past tended to prefer what she describes as "cultural cocoons."

In Friedman's terminology, so-called "cultural cocoons" involve communities of affinity. All communities of affinity tend toward a kind of in-group authoritarianism, which provides the cohesion of the group.

It remains to be seen how far the communities of otherness that Friedman envisions will ever advance.

Now, Yale's literary critic Harold Bloom is a cultivated anti-religion academic. Nevertheless, in his latest book *The Daemon Knows: Literary Greatness and the American Sublime* (2015), Bloom discusses imaginative literature in ways that are not incompatible with Vargas Llosa's ways of valuing imaginative literature.

Bloom invokes Percy Bysshe Shelley's observation that "[t]he function of the sublime is to persuade us to end the slavery of pleasure" (pages 30). Bloom says, "We have a need to heal violence, whether from without or from within. Our strongest writers . . . can meet that imaginative poverty and help protect the individual mind and society from themselves. I now have come to see that as the highest use of literature for our way of life" (page 31).

When Bloom writes about "a need to heal violence, whether from without or from within," he appears to be referring to what Jung refers to as brutality. Bloom appears to attribute our human tendency toward brutality to "imaginative poverty." And he suggests that the individual mind can be protected from succumbing to the tendency toward violence and brutality by undertaking the study of profound works of imaginative literature.

Whew! Big claim.

But is Bloom here just formulating his version of "the myth that the humanities humanize" that Vargas Llosa reports has been rejected in contemporary French theory (page 9)?

Bloom's reference to "our way of life" presumably means our American way of life. Vargas Llosa centers his attention on the way of life in a democracy, which he connects with Popper's open society. Vargas Llosa, who has lived in the United Kingdom (and in France and in Bolivia), discusses the British sense of high-brow and low-brow culture. He says, "A poet such as T. S. Eliot [who was an American who relocated to London] and a novelist such as James Joyce [who was Irish] would, in this [British] division, belong to high-brow culture while the short stories and novels of Ernest Hemingway [who was an American] or the poems of Walt Whitman [who was an American] might be considered part of low-brow culture since they are accessible to the ordinary reader" (page 60).

No doubt the British high-brow/low-brow distinction that Vargas Llosa explains here deeply informs the British novelist D. H. Lawrence's book *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1923), which Bloom describes as "famously outrageous" (page 37; also see page 168).

No doubt the British high-brow/low-brow distinction as Vargas Llosa explains it prevailed among British literary critics such as F. R. Leavis and Frank Kermode. But because Bloom values Whitman's poetry so highly, he clearly breaks from the British sense of Whitman as representing low-brow culture.

Later Bloom once again invokes "Shelley's notion that the sublime persuades us to abandon easier pleasures for more difficult engagements. In this severe vision, the slavery of pleasure yields to what lies beyond the pleasure principle" (pages 47-48).

Like Bloom, Vargas Llosa also draws on his own personal experience. “[W]hat is important about reading good novels always happens after the event; it is an effect that lights up in one’s memory and over time. This fire is still alive within me because, without these books, for better or worse, I would not be who I am. . . . These books changed me, moulded me, made me. And they are still changing and forming me, just as life is changing me” (pages 215-216).

From my own experience of reading good novels, I agree with Vargas Llosa that the important part of “reading good novels always happens after the event [of reading them].” In others words, the experience of reading them involves experiencing the immediacy of the texts. But savoring the import of the texts requires a certain distance from that experience of immediacy.

Vargas Llosa also writes of “profound works of imagination” having “powerful vitality” and the “capacity to change the life of the reader” (page 87).

As I say, Vargas Llosa’s views about profound literary works of imagination are not incompatible with Bloom’s.

Bloom invokes Shelley words about “easier pleasures.” Vargas Llosa is also concerned about such easier pleasures, even though he does not happen to use exactly those words. However, like Bloom, Vargas Llosa is concerned about the imaginative poverty.

Vargas Llosa says, “Advertising plays a decisive role in forming taste, sensibility, imagination and customs” (page 28). In two places he writes powerful encomiums about Marshall McLuhan, the Canadian critic, but without mentioning any of his works specifically (pages 38 and 207). However, McLuhan’s first experimental book *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man* (1951) featured advertisements and McLuhan’s short commentaries on each of them.

Unfortunately, Vargas Llosa does not mention the Jewish American media critic Neil Postman’s book *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, 2nd ed. (2005; 1st ed., 1985) or the British novelist and pacifist Aldous Huxley’s 1932 dystopian novel *Brave New World*. But Vargas Llosa does mention the British novelist and essayist George Orwell’s 1948 dystopian novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (page 198).

Nor does Vargas Llosa connect his extended critique of popular trends in sensationalistic journalism today with the American literary critic Walker Gibson’s perceptive critique of journalism in his book *Tough, Sweat, and Stuff: An Essay on Modern American Prose Style* (1966).

Nor does Vargas Llosa connect his extended critique of audio-visual technology and the communications revolution with the American Jesuit lecturer on philosophy and the literary imagination William F. Lynch’s classic book *The Image Industries* (1959).

Now, Vargas Llosa discusses George Steiner’s thought incisively (5-12, 37, and 212). Basically, Vargas Llosa agrees with Steiner’s claim that “‘spoken, remembered and written discourse was the backbone of consciousness’” (quoted on page 10). But Vargas Llosa notes that “[n]ow the word is increasingly subordinated to the image” – and to the “musicalization” of our culture

(pages 10 and 11). Throughout his entire book Vargas Llosa connects words with ideas, but he sees the audio-visual technology of the communications revolution as opposed to the words-and-ideas culture.

Unfortunately, Vargas Llosa does not discuss the work of the American Jesuit cultural historian and theorist Walter J. Ong (1912-2003), mentioned above. Ong himself has said that it is no secret that his thought can be connected with Steiner's. Ong advertising his interest in the word and consciousness in the very titles of three of his important books: (1) *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History* (1967), the expanded version of his 1964 Terry Lectures at Yale's Divinity School; (2) *Interfaces of the Word: Studies in the Evolution of Consciousness and Culture* (1977); and (3) *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (1982), Ong's most widely known and most widely translated book.

Ong himself characterizes his thought as phenomenological and personalist in cast.

Ong never tired of referring to the British-born and educated classicist Eric A. Havelock's landmark book *Preface to Plato* (1963), which is arguably relevant to understanding the audio-visual orientation of the communications revolution that concerns Vargas Llosa. Havelock works with the expression "imagistic thinking." For all practical purposes the audio-visual orientation of the communications revolution that concerns Vargas Llosa involves imagistic thinking – and what he refers to as musicalization. You see, Havelock characterizes the Homeric epics, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, as involving imagistic thinking. As to musicalization, they were songs sung to musical accompaniment.

The Jewish American poet and learned translator Willis Barnstone has pointed out that popular songs are poetry. Poetry is song. Song is poetry.

In the book *Homer and the Origins of the Greek Alphabet* (1991), Barry Powell hypothesizes that when the efforts were underway to transcribe the fine-sounding Homeric epics in writing, the transcribers introduced certain new letters into the Greek alphabet (vowels) in order to better capture the sounds of the poems.

Plato's dialogues are not songs, but they are elegantly written. They had to be – Plato was contending with Homer.

However, in his dialogues Plato uses his fair share of imagistic thinking in the poetic stories he works into the dialogues. For parallel Greek and English versions of them, see *The Myths of Plato*, translated with introductory and other observations by J. A. Stewart (1905).

So if Plato used generous portions of imagistic thinking in his dialogues, what exactly did he do in them that we can describe as constituting philosophical thought? He portrays the character named Socrates as asking for what I would characterize as operational definitions of certain key words – for example, in the *Republic*, justice. When we explicitly set up operational definitions of terms and then use them in an univocal way, as Vargas Llosa himself does occasionally (e.g., pages 23 and 41-42), we are undertaking philosophical thought. Univocal versus polysemous

(poetic) = philosophy versus poetry = philosophy versus sophistry. Vargas Llosa regularly refers dismissively to “sophisms.”

See Havelock’s book *The Greek Concept of Justice: From Its Shadow in Homer to Its Substance in Plato* (1978).

At first blush, the contrast of univocal versus polysemous uses of words and ideas may suggest to some people that no serious discussions of ideas will be found in serious works of imaginative literature. However, Robert Maynard Hutchins and Mortimer J. Adler included numerous works of imaginative literature in their *Great Works of the Western World* (1952; 2nd ed., 1990) – and then catalogued the ideas in them in the massive two-volume index to common ideas that they referred to as the *Syntopicon*. Ong refers to the ideas or topics in the *Syntopicon* as commonplaces.

Plato’s student Aristotle taught the world about potency and act. Act actuates potency (potential). Act reduces potency to act. For example, in Havelock’s 1978 book, he in effect shows that the concept of justice articulated in Plato’s *Republic* actuates the potential of this term expressed in Homer.

I tend to see the audio-visual technology of the communications revolution globally as potency – potential. This still-emerging global audio-visual cultural conditioning deeply impacts our psyches and imaginations.

Toward the end of Ong’s book *The Presence of the Word* (1967), mentioned above, he expresses hope about the possible positive potential of the communications media that accentuate sound on our Western cultural conditioning in the Age of Print Culture that emerged historically after the Gutenberg printing press emerged in the 1450s.

No doubt the collective cultural conditioning of the communications media that accentuate sound has already contributed effectively and decisively to our still-emerging audio-visual communications revolution globally – and will continue to do so.

As a result of this deep collective cultural conditioning of the communications media that accentuate sound, our contemporary global culture is probably ripe for new ideas to emerge, or for old ideas to be renewed with new vigor.

For example, the New Age movement seems to show renewed interest in certain ancient spiritual practices.

For further discussion of Ong’s thought, see my essay “[Understanding Ong’s Philosophical Thought](#)”.

Vargas Llosa says, “A further characteristic of this civilization is the impoverishment of ideas as a driving force of cultural life. Today images have primacy over ideas” (pages 37).

No doubt popular culture globally is awash in images and music – and is ephemeral and frivolous, as Vargas Llosa says it is (pages 29, 38, 41-42, and in passing elsewhere). In effect, the ephemeral and frivolous images and music of popular culture globally can be likened to a lingua franca.

No doubt contemporary popular culture globally challenges serious artists and intellectual globally.

In the final analysis, Vargas Llosa really wants to promote taking life seriously and undertaking serious study of serious works of literature and art. He writes of “the negligible influence of ideas in the [contemporary] civilization of spectacle” (page 37).

Despite certain oversights on Vargas Llosa’s part that I have pointed out, he is a committed intellectual who writes passionately, personally, and elegantly in the well-informed, intelligent, and judicious essays in this short book.

Oddly enough, another Latin American author who has risen to prominence, Pope Francis (also born in 1936) has issued an encyclical (2015) that also contains a sweeping critique of our contemporary global culture today. The differences between the pope’s sweeping critique and Vargas Llosa’s sweeping critique are not hard to spot. But I will not undertake to compare and contrast their critiques in detail here. But certain striking differences are worth highlighting here.

The pope’s critique includes an urgent call to action on climate change. But Vargas Llosa mentions ecology only in passing (pages 9 and 11).

But Pope Francis does not advance specific proposals for any of the many problems that he describes. Neither does Vargas Llosa.

In effect, the pope calls for a paradigm shift away from the prevailing technocratic paradigm.

In effect, Vargas Llosa also wants to see a paradigm shift, but he himself does not happen to explicitly use the term “paradigm.”

However, even though Pope Francis does not advance specific proposals, he repeatedly endorses dialogue as the way in which possible proposals might tentatively be worked out. As noted above, Ong never tired of endorsing I-thou dialogue. As mentioned above, Vargas Llosa does not say much about dialogue, even though dialogue would presumably be important to the functioning of democratic forms of government within open societies.

As noted above, Vargas Llosa emphasizes democracy as a form of government and stresses Popper’s idea of an open society. As a result, he criticizes authoritarian governments and authoritarian government actions. But Pope Francis is silent about democracy as a form of government and about authoritarian government actions, probably because the Roman Catholic Church has a hierarchical and authoritarian governmental structure – as do any number of secular non-governmental corporations. Not surprisingly, Vargas Llosa criticizes the church’s spirit of

authoritarianism when it extends to impacting non-believers in the state (pages 176-177 and 189).

Vargas Llosa unequivocally favors the idea that the state should be secular in spirit (pages 32, 92, 171-175). But Pope Francis cannot quite bring himself to making such an unequivocal declaration.

No doubt each Latin American author's sweeping critique is meant to prompt us to stop and reflect on our current world.