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The word within the world

John Kenny

Touchstones: Essays on Literature, Art and Politics

By Mario Vargas Llosa.

Faber and Faber, 353pp. £25

There is nothing mere about journalism for Mario Vargas Llosa. Commonly known as the most famous living Peruvian, the 70-year-old has produced a formidable series of novels since he began publishing in the late 1950s, but, as if not thereby sufficiently busy, he has been equally prolific as a journalist and essayist, and the volume of his uncollected newspaper articles, literary studies, art pieces, film criticism and political columns is dizzying. While many of the greats (Marquez, Paz) he is named alongside as a key artist-analyst-activist of Latin America have engaged in similar work, his particular combination of the man of letters and the man of action is unmatched on the level of sheer production.

Touchstones is the second major selection of Vargas Llosa's essays translated and edited by John King, a professor of Latin American Cultural History. *Making Waves* (1996) was a comprehensive introduction to Vargas Llosa the non-fiction writer, covering a broad range of his output from the early 1960s up to the early 1990s. By the end of that selection, we could read some of the material Vargas Llosa was writing for his new regular column in *El País*, the major Spanish newspaper, and King's present title emphasises the continued focus on Vargas Llosa the newspaperman – 'Touchstone' (*Piedra de toque*) is the column's generic title.

King is largely justified in listing his new selections under the separate headings of 'Literature', 'Art' and 'Culture and Politics' since Vargas Llosa has always himself insisted on categorical distinctions. He stridently opposes any 'merely political reading' of literature; literature, all art, is in his view purely creation, not testimony, not ideology. There is some seepage nonetheless between these subjects within the selected pieces, inevitably so given Vargas Llosa's view of creativity as the fault line where the public and private worlds meet in productive tension.

The section on culture and politics is to some extent predictable but is also refreshingly phlegmatic. One of the more noted cases of an initially left-leaning intellectual moving after disillusionment (in his case, mainly with Castro) towards the centre-right, Vargas Llosa has become a convinced defender of America ('Responses to 9/11', 'Novelist in New York') and an enthusiast of the free market ('Culture and the New International Order'). Though liberal, his broad positions leave little room for bleeding hearts; it would nevertheless be wrong to accuse him of lack of nuance. He has always been a backer of Israel, but has often expressed strong reservations (just last year he collaborated with his photographer daughter on a book on Palestine and Israel), and the longest item in the collection, the 'Iraq Diary' comprised of an *El País* series from 2003, is strikingly detailed in its attention to the present conflict. 'A Story about Rats' concerns the dictatorship of his own country presided over by Alberto Fujimori who defeated him in the 1990 presidential campaign; a more infamous dictator is dispensed with in 'The Pinochet Affair'; and a short tribute to

'Chilean Yawns' argues that boring rather than exciting politics is the best symptom of a secularised state.

The major target of Vargas Llosa's ire is anything approaching the organised idea of nationalism, the evolution of which is succinctly traced in 'Nationalism and Utopia'. He is a dedicated internationalist in both philosophy and practice (these pieces are signed off in London, Cambridge, Madrid, Lima, Paris, Washington DC, Berlin, Tahiti, New York), and the encompassing interest of the collection is the way his sometimes anarchic individualist sensibility is reflected in his commentaries on writers and artists. Most of the names covered (Cervantes, Hemingway, Conrad, Grass, Neruda, Van Gogh, Gauguin, Grosz) are familiar; others of his own tradition (José María Arguedas, Fernando Botero) are not. In either case, the keenness of insight encourages both new reading and rereading.

As in his later fiction, he is excellent on sex (Mann, Nabokov, Henry Miller) and on his idealised domain of the *maudit*, the ruined, the unconventional, the accursed, though in this too he self-investigates: his return to Camus is titled 'The Outsider Must Die', and he seems at this stage to prefer the steady Isaiah Berlin to all other thinkers. Part Freudian, part Sartre-directed existentialist, for Vargas Llosa the psychology of imagination is both positively and negatively about freedom. On the one hand, art and literature erect metaphysical supplements to the real ('Only failed fictions reproduce reality: successful fictions abolish and transfigure reality' he argues in '*Mrs Dalloway*'); on the other, they are substitute satisfactions ('A Dream Factory', on the Prado, argues that we go into a museum to 'live a sumptuous unreality, to have our fantasies embodied in other people's fantasies').

The key factor in Vargas Llosa's world popularity is that in working through these and other of his own unresolved contradictions, he has always seen that high intellectual brilliance can befit itself for widespread communication, and he is impressively wry on this in a summation here of Malraux: 'He knew that he was intelligent and brilliant and, despite this, he did not become an idiot'. In an adulatory piece on the French journalist-politician Jean-François Revel, he recalls the equivalent ways in which Voltaire, Diderot and Unamuno wrote illustrative philosophy into and around the general public problems of the day and argues that such writers show that 'journalism can be highly creative, a genre that can combine intellectual originality with stylistic elegance'. Taken now accumulatively, or taken piece by self-contained piece as originally intended, *Touchstones* suggests that the best way to become a formidable all-round journalist is to be at once brain-deep in the virtual and solidly up to the knees in the actual.

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