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Mario Vargas Llosa: Literature, Art, and Goya's Ghost

The relationship between the verbal and the pictorial—that is, between the written word and its visual representation, has exercised a particular fascination upon writers and artists throughout the ages. This nexus has operated both ways: artists have been fascinated by the manner in which writers manipulate words, syntax and style to fashion new verbal realities (novels, poems, plays), while writers for their part have succumbed to the allure of artists who utilise paint, ink, acid or crayons to create new visual realities. Examples of this mutual attraction and occasional cross-fertilisation between artists and writers abound. Perhaps no aesthetic movement illustrates the symbiosis between literature and art more consistently and strikingly than *fin de siècle* French symbolism through its premise that an idea could be expressed through form, the word or object represented being no more than a sign to open up the private world of the imagination. Thus, symbolist poets like Mallarmé, Verlaine and Rimbaud had their counterparts in painters like Redon, Moreau, Rops and Ensor—a spiritual bond between the verbal and the plastic arts that has inspired exhibitions in important museums, galleries and libraries in cities as far apart as Melbourne and Madrid.¹

With respect to the Hispanic world, it is well-known that Salvador Dalí and Federico García Lorca exercised considerable creative influence upon each other, while Dalí also produced a series of one hundred wood engravings illustrating Dante's *The Divine Comedy*. The early novels of the Spanish Nobel Prize winner for literature, Camilo José Cela, were influenced by the power and the passion of Picasso's *Guernica* (1937), whose tortured images of mayhem in turn echo the scenes of murder and mutilation in *La familia de Pascual Duarte*. Another celebrated case is that of Gustave Doré (1833-83), a talented French illustrator, and Miguel de Cervantes. Doré is remembered chiefly for his classic series of lithographs illustrating the dreams and follies of the Knight Errant of La Mancha. In the Hispanic world *El ingenioso hidalgo Don Quixote de La Mancha* has come out in more editions than any book other than the Bible, and no book of illustrations is more revered than *El Quijote de Gustavo Doré*. A particularly interesting example is that of *Little Birds*, by Anaïs Nin, a celebrated erotic writer of Spanish, Cuban French and Danish descent. Published posthumously in 1977, *Little*

Birds consists of a provocative series of vignettes, many of them utilising the paradoxical relationship between art and life to delve into the sexual desires and fantasies of men and women. In a memorable short story entitled *The Maja*, a painter and his wife can only find fulfilment by physically re-enacting the intimacy and the passion encapsulated in Goya's *La maja desnuda*. One of the most recent illustrations of the conscious interplays between literature and art is provided by Arturo Pérez Reverte, who utilises Velázquez's grand historical canvas, *La rendición de Breda*, as the source and inspiration for a novel entitled *El Sol de Breda*.

Even more so than their Spanish counterparts, the many hugely talented writers emanating from Latin America in the last forty years have been prepared to employ literature as a source not only of pleasure and edification, but also of experimentation, sometimes playful, sometimes iconoclastic. Since the early 1960s Latin American writers, ranging from Jorge Luis Borges, Julio Cortázar and Jorge Amado to Gabriel García Márquez, Carlos Fuentes, Manuel Puig and Luisa Valenzuela, have been aware of the ambiguous status conferred upon them by their chosen vocation. Although they are creators of fiction—a synonym for a lie, an untruth—this privileged breed of men and women are also expected to play the role of oracles in their home countries. Their oracular function turns them into public intellectuals who are expected to use the tools of their trade—words—to tell the truth about a series of non-fictional topics, from politics, religion and sex to culture and art. Usually when writers of the stature of García Márquez or Carlos Fuentes utter or pen words outside the field of fiction, they are taken seriously—sufficiently so for a number of these writers to have become revered or controversial figures in their homelands. More than one has had to go into exile, and some have even lost their lives for daring to speak the truth.

Probably no Latin American writer has taken his role as public intellectual more seriously than Mario Vargas Llosa, who, from the time he began to write fiction—his first novel, *La ciudad y los perros*, was published in 1963—has continued to write, speak, and indeed to act outside the field of literature. His ill-fated campaign for the presidency of Peru in 1990 has been well documented, and it is public knowledge that disenchantment with the regime of his vanquisher, Alberto Fujimori, led him to adopt Spanish nationality in 1993. As a citizen of both Spain and Peru, Vargas Llosa continues to speak and write with persuasive eloquence about non-literary issues affecting both the country of his birth and his country by adoption. For instance, in his

fortnightly syndicated column, *Piedra de toque*, which appears in *El País* in Spain and in *Caretas* in Peru, he regularly lambasts Fujimori for his dictatorial and inquisitorial *modus operandi*. In Spain he has not been slow to engage in public debate with other intellectuals over questions of national or international importance, as when he accused Spanish intellectuals of hypocrisy over NATO intervention in Kosovo.²

Not surprisingly, since Vargas Llosa has always remained steadfastly faithful to the Sartrean axiom that an intellectual must remain committed to his/her time and place in history, politics has been his preferred field outside literature. It is certainly possible to extrapolate what may be termed a "Vargas Llosan" political vision from his principal collections of articles and essays—*Contra Viento y Marca* I, II, III and *Desafíos a la libertad*. On the other hand, Vargas Llosa has numerous other interests, as confirmed by even the most cursory reading of his hundreds of non-fictional publications: bullfighting, soccer, cinema, music, gastronomy, religion, anthropology, psychology, political philosophy, erotica, travel—and art. Indeed, there is probably no living Latin American writer who has written more about painters and painting than Vargas Llosa. His extensive bibliography includes an in-depth study of the Colombian super-realist Fernando Botero, whose portrait of him fills the cover jacket of *Making Waves*, a collection in English of forty six essays by Vargas Llosa (Fig.1). In other articles or essays he focuses on such diverse painters as Frieda Kahlo, Fernando de Szyszlo, George Grozsz and Monet. If he does identify with one painter more than with others, it is with Monet, the French impressionist whose intense struggle to capture the invisible layers of reality on canvas mirrors Vargas Llosa's own endeavours to portray every possible facet of reality on paper.

However, Vargas Llosa does not only write art history and art criticism. He has written two novels in which he consummates a creative pact between literature and art, one in which the two worlds of painting and writing come together to constitute an alternative reality. In the first novel, *Elogio de la madrastra*, he interpolates six deliberately chosen paintings as illustrations for six of the novel's fourteen chapters. These paintings—by Jacob Jordaens, Francois Boucher, Titian, Francis Bacon, Fernando de Szyszlo and Fra Angelico—act as visual representations of the chapters in question, while the chapters in turn perform the function of ekphrasis, thereby acting out in words the erotic scenes represented in the paintings.³ Most importantly, the dust-jacket of this novel consists of a detail of Agnolo Bronzino's *Allegory of Love* (Fig.2). This representation of Cupid and Venus acts as a premonition of the

amorous adventures in the novel involving the diabolical Cupid figure, Fonchito, and his stepmother, the goddess-like doña Lucrecia. As one reads the novel, it becomes increasingly apparent that there is an affectionate but provocative and challenging interplay between the ekphrastic text and the visual representations, as if each were trying to outdo the other in vividness and power.

In a sequel entitled *Los cuadernos de don Rigoberto*, Vargas Llosa utilises a more subtle ekphrastic technique. No colourful, visual representations compete with the text. Instead, the reader finds ten small sketches of faces or figures in various poses, some of them sexually charged, at the end of each of the novel's nine chapters and epilogue. The sketches are in fact based on paintings or drawings by Egon Schiele (1890-1918), a Viennese expressionist whose scandalous life and art shocked his contemporaries.⁴ Rather than the sketches, whose function seems to be no more than that of pictorial footnotes, it is the ghostly figure of Egon Schiele that stakes a claim for supremacy in the novel. Schiele appears to be reincarnated in the child protagonist, Fonchito, a Cupid with horns who tempts or beguiles other characters to act out scenes from Schiele's *oeuvre*, as occurs when he asks his stepmother to imitate the pose of *Reclining Nude in Green Stockings* (Fig.3).

According to the eminent art critic, Robert W. Gaston, Vargas Llosa's utilisation of ekphrasis to enrich his literary vision betokens a fine appreciation of the history of art.⁵ Yet, in all the thousands of pages that Vargas Llosa has devoted to every conceivable aspect of culture and civilisation, there is a Spanish painter of transcendental significance who hardly rates a mention in his writings—Francisco Goya (1746-1828). However, Goya's absence from Vargas Llosa's creative and critical work is quite deceptive, for Goya constitutes an invisible presence in his work—a presence as powerful, suggestive and pervasive as the ghost of Egon Schiele in *Los cuadernos de don Rigoberto*. Many epithets have been applied to Vargas Llosa—he has been compared to Victor Hugo, Flaubert, Faulkner, Sartre and Tolstoy, and such terms as Freudian, Dantesque and Orwellian have been used to categorise his fiction. However, an analysis of his major novels reveals that there is probably no more fitting adjective to describe his literary vision than "Goyaesque".⁶ Very few writers are as conscious of their precursors and influences as Vargas Llosa, to the extent that one of the fundamental tenets of his novelistic theory is what he calls a novelist's "demons".⁷ In this regard, a case may be made for Goya as one of his most influential "cultural" demons.

One of Goya's most famous and complex etchings is a *capricho*

entitled *El sueño de la razón produce monstruos* (Fig. 4). Etched in 1797, the print portrays a man who has fallen asleep while sitting at his desk, a paper under one hand and his head resting on the other. The man could well be Goya himself, although he could also represent Gaspar Melchor Jovellanos (1744-1811), the quintessential Spanish man of the Enlightenment, who spent most of his adult life striving against all the odds to bring the ideals of reason, tolerance, clarity, science and modern education to eighteenth century Bourbon Spain. Jovellanos succeeded in introducing important reforms under Charles III, but upon the death of this enlightened monarch in 1788, Spain collapsed into an orgy of scandal, corruption, persecution and intolerance. Jovellanos was so shocked by the rampant decadence in Spain that he wrote in his diaries that his dreams had become "brief and turbulent", and that now "even the stones make me cry."⁸ What happens to civilisation when reason, intelligence and wisdom are put to sleep is the message depicted in Goya's etching. The viewer witnesses the release of the forces of darkness, ready to unleash their poison upon the world. The gargyle of evil, the owls of ignorance, the lynx of persecution and the bats who suck out the goodness out of humanity, now hover menacingly over the sleeping man, whose intellect has been anaesthetised and his pen stilled.

Obviously Goya had obscurantist Spain at the end of the eighteenth century in mind, but it does not require an undue exercise of the imagination to be able to apply this Goyaesque nightmare to other countries and to other times. Certainly any reader acquainted with Vargas Llosa's *oeuvre* would find an uncanny correspondence between the historical and intellectual resonances of *El sueño de la razón produce monstruos*, and the nightmarish moral and political vision in such novels as *Historia de Mayta* and *Lituma in the Andes*. For instance, in the former, Peru is depicted as a nation where the lights of reason have gone out, monstrous injustice reigns and Armageddon beckons. Homicidal chaos rages throughout the land, which has become a theater of war between the superpowers and their satellites, with whoring marines propping up a military junta against an invading army of Cubans and Bolivians. As in Goya's etchings, Vargas Llosa uses surrealistic cartoon-like animal symbols to convey personal depravity and moral decay. The novel opens and closes with mountains of rubbish infested with flies, cockroaches and vermin, and there are ritualistic scenes involving a lubricious tabby cat and the decapitation of a duck. In short, Goya's macabre Spain at the end of the eighteenth century has been transmogrified into Vargas Llosa's apocalyptic Peru at the end of the

twentieth. Jovellanos's delirious last words—"a headless nation, a headless nation"—are as applicable to the Spain of *El sueño de la razón produce monstruos* as to the Peru of *Historia de Mayta*.

As Spain plunged into a maelstrom of bloodshed following the Napoleonic invasion of 1808, Goya's horrified response is contained in the series of etchings entitled *Los desastres de la guerra*. The ghoulish images of carnage in this series, almost unrelieved by any touches of humanity, descend to a level of irrational, indeed demoniacal, bestiality. Men and women behave abominably, as epitomised by *Fierro monstruo*, a loathsome, bloated creature engorging its victims (Fig.5). There are numerous other scenes of repugnant slaughter in *Los desastres*, as in *Grande hazaña! Con muertos!* (Fig.6). This grotesque scene of castration, decapitation and dismemberment speaks for itself, as does a horrifying depiction of mass garrotting, *No se puede saber por qué* (Fig.7). Goya's two most notorious denunciations of war, *El dos de mayo de 1808* (Fig.8), and *El tres de mayo de 1808* (Fig.9), are canvasses whose epic grandeur serves to capture the paradox of war. The French soldiers, heirs of the French Revolution, have been sent to Spain supposedly to liberate the people from the chains of Bourbon tyranny, and yet here they are, annihilating them, even stooping so low as to use mercenaries, as if in this way they can keep their own hands unstained by Spanish blood. Is it any wonder, in the light of these two paintings, that the Spanish people's reply to the French should have been "¡Que vivan las cadenas!"...

In his paintings and etchings Goya conveys, with a mixture of horror, disgust and awe the demons that nourish war: ambition, vanity, fanaticism, barbarism and stupidity, mixed with doses of wild courage and blind idealism. In *La guerra del fin del mundo*, Vargas Llosa echoes Goya's vision of war by recounting one of the most bizarre episodes in Latin American history: a quasi-religious peasant rebellion in Brazil at the end of the nineteenth century led by a lunatic holy man, Antonio "The Counsellor". This would-be messiah set up his own state within a state, the libertarian paradise of Canudos, the refuge of Brazil's downtrodden and outcasts, the prostitutes, bandits, beggars, orphans and cripples. If to these is added the teeming cast of officers, soldiers, politicians, priests, mystics, charlatans and crooks, it is then possible to draw a correspondence with the throng of characters populating Goya's etchings and paintings about war. Like Goya's harrowing illustrations, Vargas Llosa's novel throbs with grotesque scenes of wholesale carnage, but these are not inserted gratuitously. Rather, they are meant to expose a historical truth: that when one type of fanaticism (for example,

religious) is confronted by another (political, ideological or military), it is invariably the common people who suffer. Goya's compositions are set in another time and the circumstances are quite different, but the ultimate message is certainly the same—that in the supposedly grand scheme of history, war is an infernal monster feeding on base motives and growing fat on the flesh and blood of innocent victims.

If there is one transcendental image linking Goya and Vargas Llosa, however, it is that of Saturn devouring his son, as portrayed in the shocking, phantasmagoric painting with this title (Fig.10). The viewer cannot help but reel in shock before this image, which violates a fundamental taboo. As Vargas Llosa's readers know, the primal confrontation between father and son constitutes one of the basic themes of his novels. From his very first one, *La ciudad y los perros*, to his latest one, *La fiesta del chivo*, what critics have called "the demon of the father" operates in Vargas Llosa's novels at two levels, the psychological and the political.⁹ For Goya's cannibalistic Saturn one could read any one of the monstrous father figures in Vargas Llosa's novels—for example, Richi's tyrannical father in *La ciudad y los perros*; the twisted and tortured Don Fermín in *Conversación en La Catedral*; or the despotic Don Ernesto in *La tía y el escritor*, who at one stage threatens to shoot his son like a dog and leave him to die in the street. In almost all cases the filial figures in Vargas Llosa's novels finish psychologically, if not physically, like the bloody, mutilated corpse of Saturn's son. Who could forget, for example, the crucified, emasculated, sodomised corpse of Palomino Molero with which the eponymous novel by Vargas Llosa opens? In this psychological murder mystery, it is a demented Saturn figure, Colonel Mindreau, who is responsible for this horrendous crime. Indeed, so powerful is the image of Saturn devouring his son in Vargas Llosa's *oeuvre*, that the reader can only conclude that the Spanish painter functions as a creative influence or "cultural demon" upon the Peruvian novelist.

Another significant correspondence between Vargas Llosa's novels and Goya's art lies in their respective representations of another heinous crime: cannibalism. Goya's two oils on canvas, *Canibales preparando a sus víctimas* (Fig.11), and *Canibales contemplando restos humanos* (Fig.12), yet again reduce humanity to a state of unredeemed barbarism. Goya's naked, orgiastic savages have their counterparts in *Lituma en los Andes*, Vargas Llosa's apocalyptic portrayal of contemporary Peru. In this novel the classical myth of Dionysius is transported to the peaks of the Andes, where in the names of their ancient gods and demons a gang of crazed women sacrifice their male victims, cutting

off, cooking and eating their testicles. Although Goya depicts male cannibals and Vargas Llosa female, their point seems to be the same: disbelief that in nineteenth century Spain and twentieth century Peru the values of civilization should have collapsed so totally and dramatically.

Another etching from *Los desastres de la guerra* pointedly relevant to Vargas Llosa is *El buitre carnívoro* (Fig.13). What is particularly striking here is that *el buitre* (the vulture) is Vargas Llosa's notorious symbol for the novelist, who, more often than not, uses carrion—that is, the dark side of humanity—as fodder for fiction. It is for this reason, argues Vargas Llosa, that war, pestilence, corruption, tragedy, sexual depravity and personal anguish comprise the subject matter of great novelistic vultures like Tolstoy, Faulkner, Victor Hugo, Joseph Conrad, and of course, Vargas Llosa himself. The sources of influence and inspiration in literature and art are usually mysterious, and more often than not impenetrable. Accordingly, it can be an exercise in idle fancy or fatuousness by a critic to try to identify them. However, given the potent series of correspondences between the visual and verbal universes conjured by Goya and Vargas Llosa, the question may be legitimately asked: did Goya's image of the carnivorous vulture inspire or influence Vargas Llosa's symbol for the novelist?

While their focus upon the scabrous and the grotesque establishes the most evident connection in the chain binding Goya and Vargas Llosa, their respective representations of woman and the female body also link them. *La maja desnuda* (Fig.14) and *La maja vestida* (Fig.15) are undoubtedly Goya's most provocative female portraits. Mystery surrounds the identity of the *maja* and her relationship to the painter: Who was the *maja*? Was she really the Duchess of Alba? Are the paintings really the immortalisation of their passionate love affair—he, a fifty year old artist, and she, a thirty four year old aristocrat? Just as autobiography, sex, eroticism and scandal are associated with Goya's *majas*, these are also the elements associated with Vargas Llosa's portrayal of Julia in *La Tía Julia y el escribidor* (1977). This novel scandalised Peru, with many readers disapproving of the way in which their most celebrated writer utilised his first wife as fodder for a comic novel. Julia herself was moved to publish an indignant riposte, *Lo que Varguitas no dijo*.

Moreover, just as a perusal of Goya's paintings and etching reveals many suggestive representations of women—sitting, reclining or standing—in various states of undress, a review of Vargas Llosa's novels confirms that he, too, dresses and undresses his fictional women

with a knowing glee. La Pies Dorados in *La ciudad y los perros*; Lalita in *La casa verde*; Hortensia and Queta in *Conversación en La Catedral*; and la Brasileña in *Pantaleón y las visitadoras*, are only a few of the women who titillate or shock Vargas Llosa's readers. Indeed, the voluptuous doña Lucrecia seems to spend so much time covering or uncovering her nakedness in *Elogio de la madrastra* and *Los cuadernos de don Rigoberto*, that the reader is turned into a *voyeur* or Peeping Tom. Representations of doña Lucrecia in this novel range from Jacob Jordaen's monumental bottom of the wife of the King of Lydia (Fig. 16), to Fra Angelico's gentle Madonna (Fig. 17). Doña Lucrecia has also inspired the use of a lurid, garter-belted female torso by Andrzej Klimowski on the duskjacket of the paperback edition in English by Faber and Faber (Fig. 18). Ultimately, the correspondences between Goya as painter and Vargas Llosa as novelist extend to the reader's own critical responses to their respective representations of the female body. Depending upon the reader's personal sensibilities, Goya's *majas* and Vargas Llosa's images of doña Lucrecia may be situated within a spectrum ranging from sexist caricatures to reverential icons.

Previous literary criticism has drawn attention to some of the rich and varied influences that have shaped and informed Vargas Llosa's fiction: Sartre, Flaubert, Freud, Hugo, Faulkner, Joannot Martorell and *Tirant lo Blanc*. In view of the striking visual and verbal similarities between Goya and Vargas Llosa, there is little doubt that the former should be added to the list. Across the invisible boundaries of time and space that separate them, the painter from Aragon and the writer from Arequipa emerge as two of a kind.

—Roy C. Boland
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Figure 1. Botero, Mario Vargas Llosa.



Figure 2. Agnolo Bronzino, Allegory of Love.



Figure 3. Egon Schiele, *Reclining Nude in Green Stockings*.



Figure 4. Goya, *El sueño de la razón produce monstruos*.



Figure 5. Goya, Fierro Monstruo.



Figure 6. Goya, ¡Grande hazaña! ¡Con muertos!



No se puede saber por qué

Figur 7. Goya, *No se puede saber por qué*.



Figure 8. Goya, *El dos de mayo*.



Figure 9. Goya, *El tres de mayo*.



Figure 10. Goya, *Saturno devora a su hijo*.

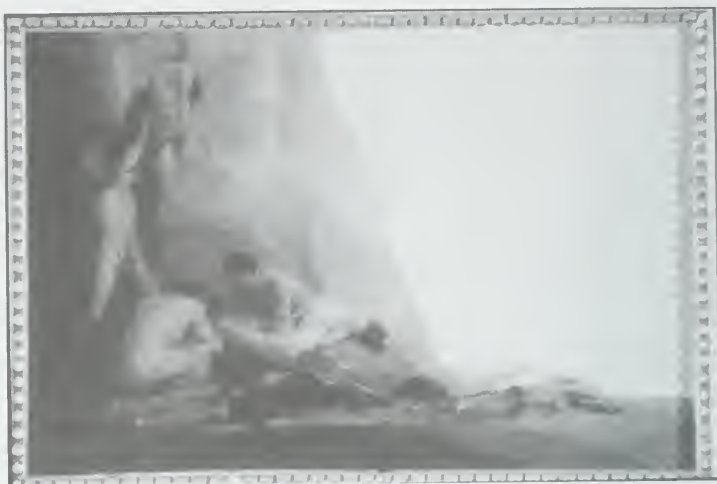


Figure 11. Goya, Caníbales preparando a sus víctimas.



Figure 12. Caníbales contemplando restos humanos.



Figure 13. Goya, *El buitre carnívoro*.



Figure 14. Goya, La maja desnuda.



Figure 15. Goya, La maja vestida.

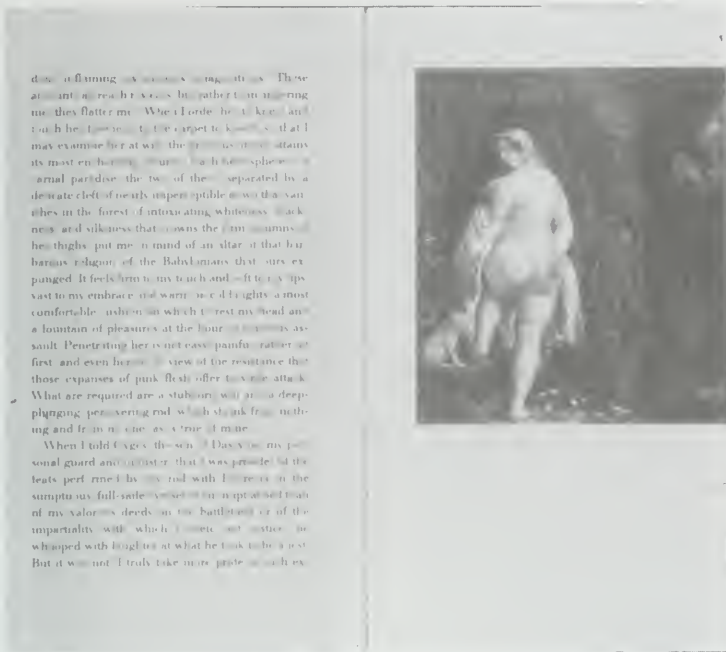


Figure 16. Jacob Jordaens, King Candaules of Lydia Showing his Wife to Gyges.



Figure 17. Fra Angelico, Madonna.

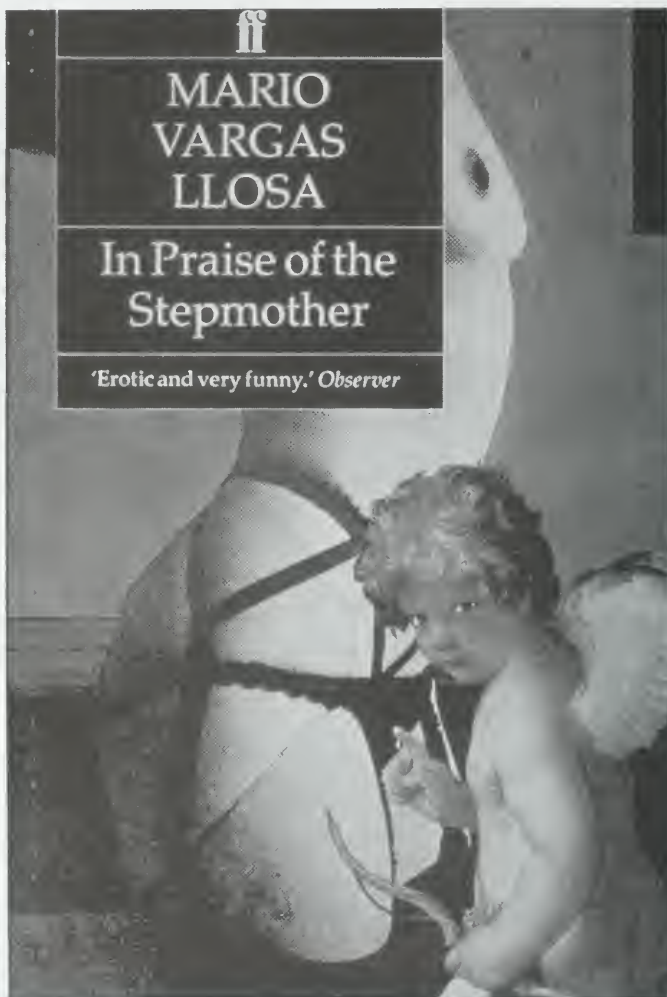


Figure 18. A. Klimowski, *In Praise of the Stepmother*.

NOTES

¹ For example, I have recently visited the following exhibitions: "Visual Artists and Mallarmé" (NGV, Melbourne, November 1998); and "Pintores del alma. El simbolismo idealista de Francia" (Mapfre Vida, Madrid, January 2000).

² For the polemic between Vargas Llosa and Manuel Vicent, see the latter's article in *El País* on 16-5-99, and the former's on 24-5-99.

³ An enlightening study of ekphrasis in *Elogio de la madrastra* is provided by Robert W. Gaston, "Pictorial Representation and Ekphrasis in *Elogio de la madrastra*."

⁴ On Egon Schiele's life and art, see *Egon Schiele: The Complete Works*.

⁵ See Robert W. Gaston, "Pictorial Representation and Ekphrasis. In *Elogio de la madrastra*."

⁶ Vargas Llosa's fullest exposition of the role and function of the "demons" is found in *García Márquez: Historia de un deicidio*, 85-213. For an explanation of the origins and significance of the "demons", see Efraim Kristal, *Temptation of the Word*, 3-6.

⁷ The basis of this article is a lecture entitled "Goyaesque Vision in Mario Vargas Llosa," delivered on October 18, 1998, at the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia, on the occasion of a Symposium to celebrate an exhibition of Goya's prints from the Gallery's collection. I thank the organisers of the Symposium, particularly Dr. Frank Heckes, Irena Zdanowicz, Irene Ruffolo and María Zavala for their support and collaboration in the preparation of the text and illustrations for this article. The book by Frank Heckes, *Reason and Folly. The Prints of Francisco Goya*, contains an invaluable illustrated commentary of *Los Disparates*, *Caprichos* and *La Tauromaquia*.

⁸ For an account of Jovellanos's life and his relationship with Goya, see Carlos Fuentes, *The Buried Mirror*, 215-31.

⁹ See Roy C. Boland, *Mario Vargas Llosa. Oedipus and the Papa State*, 8-12.

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3. Egon Schiele, *Reclining Nude in Green Stockings*. Private Collection New York.
4. Goya, *El sueño de la razón produce monstruos* National Gallery of Victoria Collection, Australia.
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8. *El dos de mayo de 1808*. Museo del Prado, Madrid.
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16. Jacob Jordaens, *King Candaules of Lydia Showing his Wife to Gyges*, National Museum, Stockholm. *In Praise of the Stepmother*. New York: Farrar-Straus, Giroux. 14-15.
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