



❖ ' Ancient Sound ' : By Paul Klee

## ❖ 'The real purpose of literature : An Essay by Mario Vargas Llosa

*( Mario Vargas Llosa is a Peruvian writer and was awarded Nobel Prize for Literature in 2010 )*

My vocation as a writer grew out of the idea that literature does not exist in a closed artistic sphere but embraces a larger moral and civic universe. This is what has motivated everything I have written. It is also, alas, now turning me into a dinosaur in trousers, surrounded by computers.

Statistics tell us that never before have so many books been published and sold. The trouble is that hardly anybody I come across believes any longer that literature serves any great purpose beyond alleviating boredom on the bus or the underground, or has any higher ambition beyond being transformed into telly- or cine-scripts. Literature has gone for 'light'. That is why critics such as George Steiner have come to believe that literature is already dead, and how novelists such as VS Naipaul have come to proclaim that they will not write another novel because the genre now fills them with disgust.

But amid this pessimism about literature, we should remember that many people still fear the writer. Look at the criminal clique which governs Nigeria and executed Ken Saro-Wiwa; at those who persecuted Taslima Nasreen in Bangladesh; at the imams who declared a fatwa on Salman Rushdie; at the Muslim fundamentalists in Algeria who have cut the throats of dozens of journalists, writers and thespians; at those in Cairo who financed the attack which could have cost the life of Naguib Mahfouz; and at all those regimes in North Korea, Cuba, China, Laos, Burma and elsewhere where censorship prevails and prisons are full of writers.

So in those countries which are supposed to be cultivated—and which are the most free and democratic—literature is becoming a hobby without real value, while in those countries where freedom is restricted, literature is considered dangerous, the vehicle of subversive ideas. Novelists and poets in free countries, who view their profession with disillusionment, should open their eyes to this vast part of the globe which is not yet free. It might give them courage.

**I have an old-fashioned view: I believe that literature must address itself to the problems of its time. An author must write with the conviction that what he is writing can help others become more free, more sensitive, more clear-sighted; yet without the self-righteous illusion of many intellectuals that their work helps contain violence, reduce injustice or promote liberty.** I have erred too often myself, and I have seen too many writers I admired err—even put their talents at the service of ideological lies and state crimes—to delude myself. But without ceasing to be entertaining, literature should immerse itself in the life of the streets, in the unravelling of history, as it did in the best of times. This is the only way in which a writer can help his contemporaries and save literature from the flimsy state to which it sometimes seems condemned.

If the only point of literature is to entertain, then it cannot compete with the fictions pouring out of our screens, large or small. An illusion made of words requires the reader's active participation, an effort of the imagination and sometimes, in modern literature, complex feats of memory, association and creativity. Television and cinema audiences are exempt from all this by virtue of the images. This makes them lazy and increasingly allergic to intellectually challenging entertainment.

I say this without animosity towards the audiovisual media; indeed, I am a self-confessed cinema addict—I see two or three films a week—and also enjoy a good television programme. But from personal experience, I have to say that all the great films I have enjoyed have not helped me understand the labyrinth of human psychology as well as the novels of Dostoevsky, or helped reveal the mechanisms of society as the novels of Tolstoy and Balzac, or charted the peaks and chasms of experience like Mann, Faulkner, Kafka, Joyce or Proust.

Screen fiction is intense on account of its immediacy and ephemeral in terms of effect: it captivates us and then releases us almost instantly. **Literary fiction holds us captive for life. To say that the works of the authors I have mentioned are entertaining would be to insult them. For, while they are usually read in a state of high excitement, the most important effect of a good book is in the aftermath, its ability to fire memory over time. The afterglow is still alive within me**

because without the books I have read, I would not be who I am, for better or worse, nor would I believe what I believe, with all the doubts and certainties that keep me going. Those books shaped me, changed me, made me. And they still keep on changing me, in step with the life I measure them against. ***In those books I learned that the world is in bad shape and that it will always be so-which is no reason to refrain from doing whatever we can to keep it from getting worse.*** They taught me that in all our diversity of cultures, races and beliefs, as fellow actors in the human comedy, we deserve equal respect. They also taught me why we so rarely get it. There is nothing like good literature to help us detect the roots of the cruelty human beings can unleash.

Without a committed literature it will become even more difficult to contain all those outbreaks of war, genocide, ethnic and religious strife, refugee displacement and terrorist activity, which threaten to multiply and which have already smashed the hopes raised by the collapse of the Berlin Wall. The stupor with which the EU witnessed the Balkan tragedy—200,000 dead and ethnic cleansing now legitimised by elections—provides dramatic evidence for the need to rouse the lethargic collective will from the complacency which holds it down. Removing blindfolds, expressing indignation in the face of injustice and demonstrating that there is room for hope under the most trying circumstances, are all things literature has been good at, even though it has occasionally been mistaken in its targets and defended the indefensible.

The written word has a special responsibility to do these things because it is better at telling the truth than any audiovisual medium. These media are by their nature condemned to skate over the surface of things and are much more constrained in their freedom of expression. The phenomenal sophistication with which news bulletins can nowadays transport us to the epicentre of events on all five continents has turned us all into voyeurs and the whole world into one vast theatre, or more precisely into a movie. **Audiovisual information—so transient, so striking and so superficial—makes us see history as fiction, distancing us by concealing the causes and context behind the sequence of events that are so vividly portrayed. This condemns us to a state of passive acceptance, moral insensibility and psychological inertia similar to that inspired by television fiction and other programmes whose only purpose is to entertain.**

That is a perfectly legitimate state to be in, we all like to escape from reality; indeed, that is one of the functions of literature. **But making the present unreal, turning actual history into fiction has the effect of demobilising the citizen, making him or her feel exempt from any civic responsibility, encouraging the conviction that it is beyond anyone's reach to intervene in a history whose screenplay is already written. Along this path we may well slide into a world where there are no citizens, only spectators, a world where, although formal democracy may be preserved, we will be resigned to the kind of lethargic dictatorships aspire to establish.**

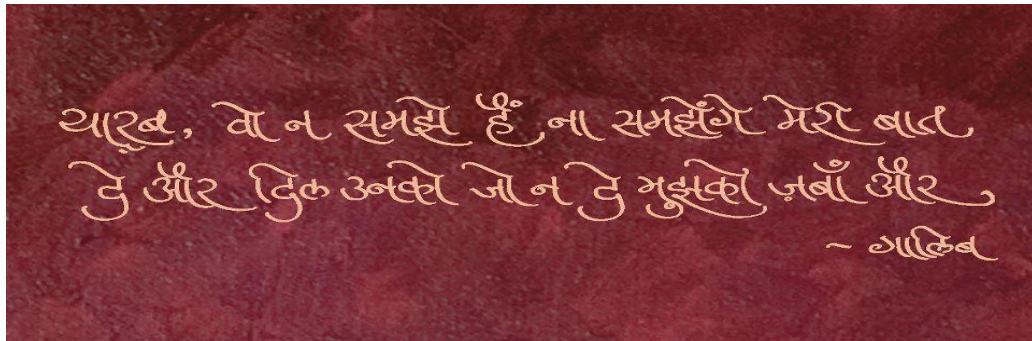
The other big problem with the audiovisual medium is the extremely high cost of production. This hangs unavoidably over every producer's choice of subject matter and over the way to tell the story. The hunger for success is not a manifestation of a filmmaker's vanity, it is the prerequisite for any opportunity to make a film (or the next film). The conformity of the audiovisual medium arises not just from the need to reach the widest possible audience, it also results from the fact that as mass media with an immediate impact on huge sectors of public opinion, television and the cinema are more controlled by the state than any other media, even in the most liberal of countries. Not that they are explicitly censored, although that can happen; rather they are under surveillance, regulated and guided. They are discouraged from tackling certain issues and encouraged to be merely entertaining.

**This is the cause of literature's responsibility. Freedom is precious, but no country can be assured that it will last unless it is exercised and defended. Literature, which owes its life to freedom, helps us to understand that freedom does not come out of a clear blue sky; it is a choice, a conviction, a train of thought that needs to be constantly enriched and tested.** Literature can also make us understand that democracy is the best means we have invented to prevent war; Kant's thesis is even more true today than when he wrote it. For at least a century now, wars have always been waged between dictatorships, or by totalitarian regimes against democracies. It is almost unknown for two democratic countries to wage war. There can be no clearer lesson. For free countries, the best way to promote peace is to promote democracy.

A writer who is engaged does not need to abandon his adventures with the imagination or experimentations with language; he does not need to abandon risk; nor does he need to give up laughing or playing, because his duty to entertain need not be incompatible with his social responsibility. To amuse, enchant, dazzle-that is what the great poems, the great tragedies, the great novels and essays have always done. No idea or character in literature can last if it does not fascinate us, like a rabbit from a magician's hat.

During his years in exile in France, while Europe was threatened by the advance of Nazism, Walter Benjamin devoted himself to the poetry of Charles Baudelaire. He wrote a book about him which he did not finish, but the fragments he left are read with fascination. Why Baudelaire? Why choose this subject during such a time? When we read Benjamin, we discover that *Les Fleurs du Mal* contained answers to such questions as how urban civilisation would develop and the plight of the individual in mass societies. The image of Benjamin poring over Baudelaire, while the circle of oppression which cost him his life closed in on him, is a moving one. At the same time the philosopher Karl Popper, in exile on the other side of the world, in New Zealand, began to learn ancient Greek and immerse himself in Plato in order to make his own contribution to the fight against totalitarianism. A crucial book emerged: *The Open Society and its Enemies*. Benjamin and Popper, the Marxist and the liberal, two engaged and original figures inside big currents of thought that they renewed, illustrate that it is possible, through writing, to oppose adversity. **They show that dinosaurs can work through difficult times-and remain useful.**

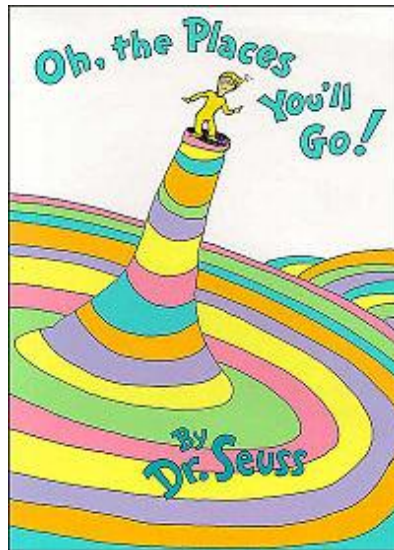
### ❖ The one and only 'Mirza Asadullah Baig Khan'



❖ 'Oh the places you will go ....' By Dr. Seuss

*At a first glance, this wonderful cartoon may appear as only meant for 'children' – but scratch a little below the surface and .....*

Access the video at : <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IQRWeZy-S8Q>



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*'Treasures' completes one year: When I put the first compilation together in January of this year, I had no idea how the whole thing was going to play out. The only thing driving me was this intense desire to share the beautiful things that I came across and discussing them with others – this is the twelfth compilation that I am sending out, and it's been an absolute joy, putting each issue together and more importantly discussing the treasures with all of you. I have had so many wonderful conversations and email exchanges. Thanks a lot for all your feedback and discussions! Do keep them coming ...*

About 'Treasures'

*It's a compilation that I put together every once in a while, of things that I have found to be beautiful and meaningful.*

*Do share it with others who you think will enjoy it.*

*Drop me an email at [shaileshd.email@gmail.com](mailto:shaileshd.email@gmail.com) if you want to add someone to the circulation list.*

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