The Humanism of Mario Vargas Llosa's *The Dream of the Celt*

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The Dream of the Celt is a novel that first appeared in Spanish in 2010. Later that year its author, Peruvian-born Mario Vargas Llosa, was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. The review here is of the 2012 English translation. Although a work of fiction, it reads more like a biography, in this case of the Irishman Roger Casement, born in 1864. It begins with him in an English prison hoping for clemency from the British government so that he would not be executed for WWI treason. The remainder of the novel flashes back and forth between his eventful past life, much of it in British diplomatic service, and his prison stay. Only the final chapter recounts his eventual fate.

In his Nobel Lecture, Vargas Llosa said that "literature not only submerges us in the dream of beauty and happiness but alerts us to every kind of oppression." And it is fighting oppression that the life of Casement primarily deals with: the oppression of the Congolese under King Leopold II of Belgium, of Indians by the rubber-producing Peruvian Amazon Company, and of the Irish, still in WWI being denied independence by the English. Based on much evidence, Vargas Llosa details Casement's herculean efforts against all these oppressions. And there is still another oppression that exists in the novel, that hanging over the homosexual Casement, for he was gay at a time when a fellow Irishman, dramatist Oscar Wilde, was imprisoned (for awhile in the same prison Casement would find himself two decades later) for homosexual "gross indecency."

As a historian, I have some concern with how much of the novel is based on historical facts and how much is the fruit of Vargas Llosa's rich imagination. I first became aware of Casement in a historical work, Adam Hochschild's *King Leopold's Ghost*, which deals with the atrocities in the Congo licensed by the Belgian king beginning in the late 19th century. Hochschild devotes a chapter (Ch. 13) and other scattered references to Casement, primarily to his efforts to publicize Congo abuses, but also briefer mentions of his later activities in behalf of Peruvian Indians and Irish independence. Hochschild also mentions that Casement was gay.

Most of Vargas Llosa's novel is based on historical facts, including Casement's reports condemning Congolese and Peruvian atrocities and his meetings with various historical figures like U. S. President William Howard Taft. Even the novel's characters of lesser fame that I checked on were actual persons. Perhaps only in rendering Casement's private thoughts does the author exercise much poetic license, but even here he has been guided by primary historical sources such as Casement's diaries (see, e.g., here) and letters. To the non-historian the exact mix of history and fiction should not make much difference as long as it is kept in mind that a novelist may take some liberties that a historian or biographer should not.

Vargas Llosa himself would be a fascinating subject for a biography. Now age 76, he is the latest of six Latin American recipients of the Nobel Prize for Literature since 1945. He has lived in various counties for long periods of time, especially France and Spain, and has been a visiting professor at such prestigious universities as Georgetown and Princeton. In 1990 he ran for the

Peruvian presidency but lost in a run-off election. Besides his numerous works of fiction, he also has often written journalistic pieces on political, as well as cultural matters.

In his essay Confessions of a Liberal (2005), he stated: “Because liberalism is not an ideology, that is, a dogmatic lay religion, but rather an open, evolving doctrine that yields to reality instead of trying to force reality to do the yielding, there are diverse tendencies and profound discrepancies among liberals. With regard to religion, gay marriage, abortion and such, liberals like me, who are agnostics as well as supporters of the separation between church and state and defenders of the decriminalization of abortion and gay marriage, are sometimes harshly criticized by other liberals who have opposite views on these issues. These discrepancies are healthy and useful because they do not violate the basic precepts of liberalism, which are political democracy, the market economy and the defense of individual interests over those of the state.” In the United States, however, his defense of what in Latin America is known as “neoliberalism,” which has aimed at cutting back government “interference” in the “free” play of market forces, has alienated even more liberals.

But the present essay/review, except for this brief mention, is not concerned with his overall political views, but only with the humanism that permeates *The Dream of the Celt*. In the novel’s Epilogue, Vargas Llosa sketches the reputation of Casement after his death, noting that partly because of his homosexuality, Irish public opinion long denied him the hero status gained by other early twentieth-century Irish freedom fighters. More recently, however, “his compatriots became resigned to accepting that a hero and martyr is not an abstract prototype or a model of perfection but a human being made up of contradictions and contrasts, weakness and greatness.” This statement sums up the humanism that shines through the novel, for Casement is a hero and a tragic one, with weaknesses like all of us humans, but also with some of the heroic traits that make us proud of our fellow humans at their best. It is not only Casement’s empathy with victimized Congolese and Peruvian Indians that makes this novel so humanistic, but also Vargas Llosa’s ability to depict his hero’s complex and detailed mix of human “weakness and greatness.”

Complex indeed. For the self-proclaimed liberal novelist sees his liberalism and humanism as being non-dogmatically open to the complexity of reality. In the early parts of the novel dealing with the Congo and Peru, the reality and truth seem pretty clear: those exploiting the Congolese and Peruvian Indians are wrong, and Casement and those who fight against such exploitation are right. We applaud the Irishman who fights so heroically and tirelessly to rally public opinion against such flagrant abuses of other human beings. After his report on Peruvian atrocities was published, *The Times* (of London) referred to him as a “great humanitarian.” (254) But as Vargas Llosa increasingly details Casement’s homosexual activities and Irish radicalism directed against British control, truth becomes more complex. And our sympathies for Casement take on a new hue, as more colors are added to the rainbow of his personality. By the end of the novel we are sympathizing with him more because of the agonies he faces in trying to deal with complex realities than because he is some sort of superhero, as he often appeared in battling Congolese and Peruvian atrocities. We empathize with him because we realize in his situation there are no easy answers and Vargas Llosa helps us experience his all too human agonies—of the body, as well as of the spirit, for as he ages he often ails physically.

Take, for example, his homosexuality. The author makes clear Casement’s longing for attractive males; and, whether homosexual or heterosexual, we can identify with being sexually attracted to

someone else, for that is part of being human. More deeply, however, we long for love. But for Casement it is not easy to find, and he realizes that his "rapid encounters in parks, dark corners, public bathrooms, stations, foul hotels" are "pleasure, not love. . . .They were ephemeral moments of pleasure, nothing that could compare with the stable relationship, lasting over months and years, in which added to passion, were understanding, complicity, friendship, dialogue, solidarity." (222) Then finally, during WWI, he meets a "beautiful Viking," a Norwegian named Eivind Adler Christensen. And at times, he thought "beyond pleasure, he had at last established a loving relationship that could endure and take him out of the solitude his sexual preference had condemned him to." (320) But like many lovers, whether straight or gay, Casement's love blinded him to Eivind's true character. The Norwegian betrayed him to British Intelligence by reporting on his clandestine activities with German authorities. Thus, his homosexuality helped lead to his eventual arrest when he returned by submarine from Germany to Ireland right before the Easter Rebellion of 1916.

After his arrest, while waiting for the British government to decide on his clemency petition, the government released portions of his diaries to help turn public opinion against any leniency because of the homosexual revelations contained therein.

Just as his homosexuality creates agonizing problems for him, so too does his Irish nationalism. He learned much from his good friend Irish nationalist and historian Alice Stopford Green, who was almost two decades his senior. On one occasion when she visits him in prison, they talk of the bloodshed resulting from the Irish rebellion of 1916 and the mixed feelings of the Irish about rebelling during wartime. She tells him, "Nothing is black-and-white. . . . Not even in so just a cause. Here, too, those confused grays appear that cloud everything." (278)

Should the Irish rebel or use peaceful non-violent means to gain greater rights? Opposing the position of Casement and Stopford Green, for example, was John Redmond, member of the British Parliament and leader of the Irish nationalists who campaigned within Parliament for Home Rule, which would allow the Irish to have their own Parliament in Dublin. While granting the British government the continued right to direct military and foreign affairs, Home Rule would have allowed the Irish Parliament to deal with Irish domestic affairs.

Once WWI begins, should Irish nationalists collaborate with Germany, which might be beneficial in their mutual goal of weakening Great Britain? Casement thought so and went to Germany to help coordinate efforts. While there, however, he received a letter from Stopford Green objecting to his collaboration with the German military, which was killing Irish soldiers fighting for Great Britain. "His political mentor, friend, and teacher disagreed with him. . . .From then on a question echoed in his mind with the sound of an evil omen: *What if Alice is right and I've made a mistake?*" (322)

Although most of us don't have to make decisions of such momentous consequences, we all have faced difficult choices and experienced self-doubts after making a choice. Such too is part of the human condition, and so we empathize with Vargas Llosa's hero whether we agree with his decision or not.

His Irish nationalism is part of the much greater phenomenon of nationalism that swept over various parts of the world beginning in the nineteenth century. It is akin to the nationalism of the Polish poet Adam Mickiewicz, who suffered Russian exile for advocating Polish nationalism

(closely connected with its Catholicism) at a time when the return of Polish independence was still a dream. Casement's idealizing of the Irish people is like that of many other nationalists, who idealized the "folk" of their country, as did early nineteenth century German nationalists or Russian Slavophiles. He studies the Gaelic language and Irish history, and plans to get to know fisherman who "knew no English and spoke only Gaelic," and "peasants, artisans, and fisherman who, with their stoicism, hard work, and patience, had resisted the crushing presence of the colonizer, preserving their language, their customs, their beliefs. He would listen to them, learn from them." (155)

But nationalism also had a darker side, and it helped lead to WWI. As Winston Churchill later wrote about Europe on the eve of war, "National passions, unduly exalted in the decline of religion, burned beneath the surface of every land with fierce, if shrouded fires." And later in the century, Hitler further demonstrated how nationalism and glorifying the *volk* (folk) could be put to such evil uses.

In his Nobel lecture, Vargas Llosa states:

> I despise every form of nationalism, a provincial ideology—or rather, religion—that is short-sighted, exclusive, that cuts off the intellectual horizon and hides in its bosom ethnic and racist prejudices. . . . Along with religion, nationalism has been the cause of the worst slaughters in history, like those in the two world wars and the current bloodletting in the Middle East. . . .
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> We should not confuse a blinkered nationalism and its rejection of the "other," always the seed of violence, with patriotism, a salutary, generous feeling of love for the land where we were born, where our ancestors lived, where our first dreams were forged, a familiar landscape of geographies, loved ones, and events that are transformed into signposts of memory and defenses against solitude.

But he also understands that there are different forms of nationalism and that that of oppressed peoples has significant differences from that of powerful nations. He sympathizes with Casement's patriotism and, up to a point, his nationalism, but he has admirable characters also express doubts about whether he is going too far. Dramatist George Bernard Shaw thinks that even patriotism was "the enemy of lucidity." (152) A year before the beginning of WWI, Casement's good friend Herbert Ward accused him of "embracing the national idea in a way that was too exalted, not very rational, almost fanatical." And from then on Casement would sometimes ask himself, "*Am I turning into a fanatic?*" (305) It is a question Vargas Llosa probably wishes us to ponder.

Closely connected to Irish nationalism is Catholicism. Casement grew up Protestant, although his mother had had him secretly baptized a Catholic when he was very young. Throughout most of his life, "he wasn't an atheist or an agnostic but something more uncertain, an indifferent man who did not deny the existence of God—the "first principle"—but was incapable of feeling comfortable in the bosom of a church." (46) But then, as he becomes more of an Irish nationalist, he warms toward Catholicism, which was so intricately connected with Irish history, notwithstanding the Protestant Irish in Northern Ireland. Finally, while in prison, he takes great comfort from visits by a Catholic priest and reading the medieval classic that the priest lends him, *The Imitation of Christ.* He thinks of converting to Catholicism—actually rejoining the Church he was once baptized into—but asks "Won't my conversion to Christ seem inspired by fear? The truth is, Father Carey, I'm afraid. Very afraid." (96)

Although an agnostic himself, Vargas Llosa understands the fear of death and the comfort religion might give someone condemned to die and uncertain whether his plea for clemency will be granted. His skillful prose enables us to imagine the terrible angst, the "fear and trembling" to borrow Kierkegaard's phrase, of someone looking at death head on. (See here, Chs. 36-38, for a similar story of political criminals sentenced to be hanged but awaiting the resolution of appeals for clemency.)

Besides the topics already treated, there are others that the author invites us to consider. When Casement first goes to Africa as a young man he believes that the three Cs—Christianity, civilization, and commerce—justified colonialism. Eventually, he realizes they do not. Although he encounters some good missionaries, he comes to see—as did novelist Joseph Conrad, whom he met in the Congo—that the greed of the Belgian king, his subordinates, and other exploiters in the Congo greatly outweighed any other considerations.

When we look at the history of modern atrocities we see, as I have stated elsewhere, that "in almost all cases of wars and atrocities, the enemy was depicted as less human by the use of derogatory terms." We see the same thing here. One of the exploiters of the Peruvian Indians tells Casement, "You can't treat animals [the Indians] like human beings."

As Casement becomes more involved politically, going around Ireland in 1913 giving speeches, Vargas Llosa probably reflects his own political experiences when he writes about his hero: "He had heard and read that politics . . . at times brought to light the best in a human being—idealism, heroism, sacrifice, generosity—but also the worst—cruelty, envy, resentment, pride. He confirmed that this was true." (308)

Thus, in *The Dream of the Celt* we have a modern tragedy of a human being who is noble in many ways, noble enough for us to regard many of his deeds with admiration. Some of the problems he faces are timeless human ones: dealing with sexual longing and searching for love; confronting illnesses and death; deciding on questions of God and religion; and making other agonizing choices. But the novel also deals with many of the major issues of the last century and a half: colonialism, imperialism, nationalism, rebellions, human rights and battles for freedom (including for homosexuals), war, violence, and capital punishment. By focusing on his hero's grappling with both timeless and more modern issues and presenting him as a "human being made up of contradictions and contrasts, weakness and greatness," Vargas Llosa has given us a novel that truly reflects the basic human condition and the complexities of modern life—and is humanistic in the fullest sense of the word.