Efrain Kristal
I would like to begin by asking you about the creative process behind your most recent novel, El sueño del celta (2010) – now published in English in 2012 as The Dream of the Celt. In a couple of interviews you had talked about the research you were doing on the Congo and on Belgium, and you had written some articles on Leopold II, so there was a lot of speculation about a new novel by Mario Vargas Llosa on Leopold II. When the novel came out, it was focused on a different historical character, Roger Casement. How did your interest in Leopold II develop, and what transformations took place so that the hero of the novel became Roger Casement?

Mario Vargas Llosa
The origin of my novels has always been very mysterious for me. Something suddenly provokes a kind of curiosity about someone or something, and then little by little all this produces a kind of necessity and urgency to write a novel based on these experiences. In this case, The Dream of the Celt, the origin was a new biography of Joseph Conrad, of whom I am a great admirer. I discovered that the first person that Conrad had met when he went to the Congo was Roger Casement, a British subject who had already been there for eight years.

Roger Casement had a great influence on Conrad: he opened Conrad’s eyes to what was going on in the Congo. Conrad probably held the standard European view of imperialism and colonisation – that it was something positive, which brought civilisation, commerce, Christianity, modernity to barbarous people amongst whom slavery and human sacrifices were common. Roger Casement gave Conrad a very different idea: he explained to Conrad all the atrocities that were being committed by the Belgian colonisation. This was very important for the change in vision of Conrad, and it produced his masterwork, Heart of Darkness.

I became very curious about Roger Casement. I discovered that he had been in the Amazon region – in Peru, Brazil, Columbia – and that he had been very active in denouncing all the crimes that were committed both in the Congo and in the Amazon region. He had a very adventurous life; he was like a great character in a novel. It was in this way that suddenly I discovered that, without knowing, I had already been working on the embryo of a novel.
Efraín Kristal
As part of your writing process you often travel, and in the case of this novel one of your trips was to the Congo. How did that trip affect the writing of the novel?

Mario Vargas Llosa
Very much. I went to Boma, which was the capital of the Congo during Roger Casement's days. It has not changed much: all the Belgian buildings are in total disrepair, but they are still there. You get a very interesting idea of what it was like there: how the Europeans were just a fistful of people, completely isolated in this enormous world, how life contrasted for them there, and the nostalgia they felt for Europe. It was very helpful.

The catastrophe that is the Congo today – total anarchy, civil wars, a society deeply disrupted by the lack of a state and a lack of institutions – is something that comes from the times of Roger Casement, as a consequence of the kind of colonisation that the Belgians imposed in the Congo. I think it is one of the saddest countries in the world.

What was very sad for me was to discover that nobody remembers Roger Casement in the Congo. I remember one night drinking cachaça – the Spanish Ambassador had organised a meeting inviting people from the university, intellectuals – and no one knew about Roger Casement, a man who had concentrated 20 years of his life to document all the atrocities that were committed there, and who had fought so decisively to change things for the Congo. It was different in Iquitos, in Peru. I discovered one day, to my surprise, a very small street called Roger Casement – I could not believe my eyes. I asked people there, 'Do you know who Roger Casement was?' No one knew, but at least they had one street in Iquitos called Roger Casement.

Efraín Kristal
For many of your novels you do an extensive amount of research, but the research is often a springboard that allows you to invent. What were the aspects of Roger Casement's life that you needed to invent?

Mario Vargas Llosa
I like this question a lot, because I would like to emphasise that the book is a novel; it is not a history book, it is not an accurate biography of Roger Casement – it is a novel. That means that there are more fantasies, more imagination, than historical memory. It is true that I do a lot of research for my novels, but not as a historian would do his research, not to find true facts that I would describe in the book. For me, the research is to familiarise myself with the environment that I want to invent in the novel. It is to make me feel more secure, less insecure, and less uncertain about what I am going to write. It is also to have inspiration: the research is always very useful to give me ideas, characters, anecdotes, situations.

The research is a very personal kind of research. I am not trying to find what is true. In this novel, as with other novels based in history, the basic historical facts are there; I have respected the basics, but I have changed many things. I have invented characters. The historical characters I have treated like literary characters, changing episodes, even changing personalities. In the case of Roger Casement, there are so many dark episodes in his life, that leaves the writer a big field to invent, to fill the gaps of his life with fantasy, with imagination. In those cases I have always tried to invent things that could be possible in the context of his life.

Michael Wood
Would you give us an example of an outright invention?

Mario Vargas Llosa
We do not know the kind of life that he had in the three months that he was in Pentonville Prison. The only testimony is of the executor: in his memoirs he said that the most courageous person that he had hanged, and apparently he hanged a lot, was Roger Casement. That is the only testimony. Everything that happens in Pentonville Prison in my novel is invented.

Michael Wood
The visits, the conversation?

Mario Vargas Llosa
I went to visit the prison, and so I had an idea of the kind of life that those condemned to death had. It was total isolation; he could not talk with anybody. Even the guardians were forbidden to talk to him. This gave me an idea of the kind of life that he probably had, but everything is invented in this part of his life.

Michael Wood
In the admirable tentacle structure of the novel, we are in the prison all the time.

Mario Vargas Llosa
This is ‘the present’ of the novel, yes.
Michael Wood
We get flashbacks to the Congo, and then to the Amazon, and to Ireland and Germany. But there is a constant return to this prison, which he is in for a relatively small number of days. Did you think of that structure early on, or did it come to you later?

Mario Vargas Llosa
The structure always comes after. In the beginning I do research, I take a lot of notes, and I start to write episodes. Then suddenly the episodes coalesce and produce a kind of structure. It comes afterwards, never at the beginning. I remember, many years ago, hearing a French novelist, Alain Robbe-Grillet, say, ‘In most of my stories the first idea is not a character, not an anecdote or an argument; it is a form, it is a way of organising, for example, the point of view, or the time structure’. For me that was unbelievable, because I have never had this kind of abstract idea first. No, for me the beginning is always a character or a story, an episode, and then the structure is something that transpires out of the story.

Michael Wood
The title of the book is very beautiful, because it means many things. The Dream of the Celt is a poem that Roger Casement was intending to write. The dream of the Celt is the dream, but his dream changes all the time. There is a very interesting connection between this novel, and the previous novel, The Bad Girl, in the sense that you have characters who always seem to be running away from something and who seem to need to reinvent themselves and are seeking to find a meaning to their lives that is elusive to them.

Mario Vargas Llosa
I am always fascinated by people who dream and try very hard to incarnate their dreams; people who try to make possible the impossible. These kinds of adventurers are fascinating for me, and I think they reappear constantly in my novels. Roger Casement more or less represents this kind of person. He had a dream and, at the same time, he was a very practical, realistic person. He tried very hard to materialise the dream: first fighting against the Belgians in the Congo, then fighting against the rubber owners in the Amazon, and then trying to materialise the independence of Ireland.

He was a dreamer in the sense that his dreams were very far away from the real world. He made many mistakes, but in general he was an idealist, he was a very ethical man; he tried to be very coherent with his ideas, he organised his life in order to materialise his dreams. At the same time he was a hero, but a very human hero. We have the idea that heroes are perfect people, and they are not. He is the personification of the human being who is a hero in certain aspects of his deeds and actions, and a very imperfect man in other aspects of his life. It is because he is so human that he is controversial.

His case is very interesting, because he is a hero that nobody entirely accepts. He is rejected for many reasons. Even people who were very close to what he wanted, are very reluctant to accept him, because of all the contradictions there were in his life. For me, this is what makes Roger Casement a real human being.

Michael Wood
You conjure very well through these prison scenes how difficult it gets for him the closer it gets to the present. For the dreamer in the Congo and the dreamer in the Amazon, the dreams are not so problematic: they are human, they are noble, they are fighting against corruption and torture. The Irish question is a much more complicated affair: he has to be a hero on the one side and a traitor on the other.

Mario Vargas Llosa
Even in the Congo and the Amazon cases he had to face great opposition; he was against the government. Leopold II, who probably perpetrated the first genocide of the 20th century, was a very clever man, and he had created this myth about himself as the great humanitarian of the time. That is the reason why, in 1885 in Berlin, 14 countries gave Leopold II the Congo as a gift, in a conference where no African was present. Those countries were so convinced that Leopold II was a great humanitarian who wanted to eradicate slavery from Africa, who wanted to eradicate human suffering, that they gave him – not Belgium, but him – the Congo as a gift.

When Roger Casement started to denounce the atrocities in the Congo, he was against the government. It was very difficult. All the machinery of Leopold II was put into action immediately, and so there was enormous opposition to what Roger Casement was doing. He was not alone, of course, but in the beginning the movement was very small, so he needed great courage.

It is true that in the Ireland case his position was very complicated, because he was a kind of national hero in England. The British Government had sent him to the Amazon, because he was considered a great humanitarian; he had been ennobled. To conspire against England during the First World War was very complicated.

Michael Wood
Conspiring against England is fine; it is conspiring with the Germans that was the real problem.

Mario Vargas Llosa
The big surprise for Roger Casement was when he went to see the Irish prisoners of war in Germany with the idea to form this legion to fight for the independence of Ireland. He discovered that practically all of the prisoners were against him; that they preferred England to Germany. It was quite natural: they had been fighting them, they were dying, so it was difficult to convince them that the real allies of the Irish were the Germans. He was very naive. I think this big disappointment was very instructive, because my impression is that in that moment he was a fanatic; he had become a fanatic nationalist. I think this
disappointment showed to him that, even in such clear cases as colonialism and nationalism, the reality was not black and white; that there were nuances, and you should try to adapt these ideas to the real world.

I think the relationship that he had with the leaders of the rebellion is fascinating. At the beginning he was totally thrilled by these young people who were preparing this upheaval, and he thought that there was a real chance for a military victory, particularly if Germany attacked England simultaneously with the rebellion. Then, when he talked with the leaders of the upheaval, he discovered that they knew quite clearly that there was no chance of victory; that this upheaval was planned like a biblical sacrifice to produce martyrs. Most of them were fanatically religious people convinced that the only way in which the independence of Ireland could become a popular course was with martyrs, as it was in the case of Christianity.

He was terrified when he discovered that, and that is the reason why he came up with another very naive idea that he could stop the rebellion. He thought that he could stop it; that he could convince the leaders of the upheaval that they should put an end to this conspiracy. The paradox is that he was captured and that the English thought that they had captured the leader of the rebellion. British intelligence was convinced that he was the leader of the rebellion, that he was coming to lead the rebellion, and that is probably the reason why he was hanged. Actually he had come to stop the rebellion.

Michael Wood
There is something very touching about the way you have portrayed all his errors, which are not hidden in your book – his naivety and follies. There is something about the vulnerability of that man waiting to die, which is full of dignity and makes him a hero.

Mario Vargas Llosa
I think he was a tragic person, because there was this other personal aspect in him, which was his homosexuality. We must remember that at that time it was a crime; you were sent to prison if you were discovered as a homosexual. For him to be a homosexual probably was living in permanent tension with fear, with frustration, and that is the context in which we must place the famous Black Diaries.

Michael Wood
They were thought to be invented for a long time, were they not? They were thought to be a plant.

Mario Vargas Llosa
There is still this controversy. People believe that this was a fake produced by British intelligence to discredit him, and there are some historians who still defend this thesis. But for me, this is very improbable. I do not think there was enough time to produce a fake of this magnitude, because the Black Diaries are enormous, and most of them match with real life. Maybe there was some manipulation. What I think is that he probably wrote the Black Diaries, but it was impossible that he lived all the experiences that he described in the Black Diaries – given the kind of society in which he lived. For example, in Boma in the Congo, the European community was so small, everybody knew what everybody did. I think it was totally impossible for him to have the kind of experiences that he described.
On the other hand, the Black Diaries are written in a way that is a contradiction with what his personality was. All the testimonies about his person, his manners, were of a very polite, very elegant person – shy, discreet, and delicate in conversation. One of his friends said that each time he heard four-letter words he blushed. It is difficult to match that with the way in which these Black Diaries are written – the obscenities, the four-letter words, and particularly the vulgarity in the description of the sexual episodes. You get the impression that he wrote all this because it was the only way in which he could live these kinds of experiences. Because it was impossible in real life to have these excessive experiences, he wrote them, as novelists do.

**Michael Wood**

What a terrible thing: to be condemned on your imagination and not on your real deeds.

**Mario Vargas Llosa**

There is one question: if he was going to Germany to conspire against Britain, how could he abandon these Black Diaries in his apartment in London? Why did he not destroy them? I suppose the reason was because they were fantasy: He did not take seriously something that was not serious; it was a kind of perverse personal trick that he had with himself. He probably never imagined that these would become public, and that they would be so destructive to his personality.

There will never be a definite solution to this controversy. Certain people want these Black Diaries to be true, and some want them to be a fake.

**Efraín Kristal**

When you wrote *El paraíso en la otra esquina* (2003) – published in English as *The Way to Paradise* – this wonderful novel that juxtaposes the lives of Paul Gauguin and Flora Tristan, you chose to focus on the last couple of years of Flora Tristan’s life, the period in which she was seeking a depth for a political programme. I cannot help but see some echoes of your own memoir, *A Fish in the Water* (1993), when you ran for the Presidency of Peru. Is this another unconscious thing, or were you thinking about her political ideals and programmes after having had such an important political experience yourself?

**Mario Vargas Llosa**

I was very much taken by the personality of Flora Tristan, who was an extraordinary character, but particularly by her two last years, in which she was very ill. She knew that her great goal in life was impossible to realise. In spite of all this, she started this incredible journey, which was, for her, the beginning of the world revolution. She was alone. She was very popular among the workers, who she considered a major instrument for the revolution. But she was hated by the wives of the workers, because they considered that she distracted them from the family. Despite these obstacles she started the world revolution by herself. These two last years of her life are extraordinary, because it was by force of will that she managed to survive. I privileged this part of her life because the courage and idealism of her character were more visible.

**Efraín Kristal**

In your work as a writer, there is a very intense dialogue with other works of literature. Sometimes the dialogue is hidden, and sometimes it is explicit. In recent years there are hints that Russian literature seems to matter to you in a particular way. For example, in *The Bad Girl*, one of your characters is a translator, who translates Russian literature, and gives pride of place to Chekov and to Bunin as his favourite writers. Why did you decide to underscore Russian literature in that novel?

**Mario Vargas Llosa**

I admire Ivan Bunin very much. I think he was a very great writer, and he wrote about these terrible times in which society was changing completely. A sensible writer would not avoid commitment to the changes, but at the same time, if he was totally lucid about what was going on, it would be also impossible for him not to detect, in all these general, idealistic transformations, the symptoms of something terrible that could come as a consequence. This was the case with Ivan Bunin. His stories express the nuances in the revolution that in the future would become the total contradiction of what the revolution was trying to achieve.

Flora Tristan (1803-1844), the socialist and feminist writer and activist who appears in Mario Vargas Llosa’s ‘The Way to Paradise’.
These nuances are so important, particularly in times in which everything seems to be black and white. Even in periods of general enthusiasm in which unanimity seems to be achieved, one of the great functions of literature is to make people aware of a possible error in this enthusiasm, to make people aware that reality is never totally clear and absolute.

Michael Wood
Can I ask what you are working on now?

Mario Vargas Llosa
I am working on a novel, but I am still at the beginning, so I cannot say much, because I do not know exactly what will happen. It is a novel set in Peru. Peru in the last 12 years, since the collapse of the dictatorship, has been experiencing an economic boom: it has been improving very rapidly, the middle classes are growing dramatically. All this is producing a lot of benefits to the country, but also problems: urbanisation, for example, has produced the kind of crime that is a very important protagonist of daily life, the drug problem is enormous, and all this has changed life in the cities. It is a novel in this context.

This context is changing the relationship between the capital and the provinces, the cities of the interior, which are growing, sometimes more rapidly than the capital. This is producing all kinds of challenges for the country. I am fascinated with all these changes. I spend only three months a year in Peru, and I go every seven or eight months, and the changes are so dramatic in the last years. That has given me an idea for a novel about the change in Peru.

Mario Vargas Llosa was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2010. *The Dream of the Celt* was published in June 2012 by Faber and Faber.

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The British Academy event was held on 6 June 2012. A video recording of the whole conversation can be found at www.britac.ac.uk/events/2012/MarioVargasLlosa.cfm