

The Changed Jaguar

THE TIME OF THE HERO. By Mario Vargas Llosa. Translated by Lysander Kemp from the Spanish, "La ciudad y los perros." 409 pp. New York: Grove Press. \$5.95.

By HARRY SYLVESTER

THERE are institutions which impose their own stylized structure and quality upon novels about them as inevitably as a magnet imposes its field of attraction upon iron filings. The young Peruvian novelist, Mario Vargas Llosa, has not been able to escape such patterning in this novel about a famed military school in Lima. But, through the exercise of a remarkable talent, he has been able to imbue it with a hard surface reality. He turns out also to be moralist; more remarkable still, he does not engage his moralism in fashionable confrontations but in the realm of the individual and his actions.

His publishers seek somewhat desperately on the jacket of the book to find a social meaning here and the condemnation of a society; but apart from the implied criticism of some of the officials at the school, Vargas is concerned less with society than with growth and change in the individual and the mystery of how these are accomplished. In this he knows better than to be specific. Rather he adumbrates, so that the silences enclosing each significant gesture or event become cumulatively more eloquent than the happenings themselves. This is particularly the case with one of his key figures called the Jaguar, a violent student with a criminal background unknown to the school. A less likely character for even a relative moral rehabilitation would not be easy to find.

During a field exercise employing live ammunition, on impulse Jaguar kills the weak-

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ling in his class. The school's authorities carry out an investigation which turns into a whitewash, but another student is certain that he knows the killer. The student is aided by a young lieutenant on the faculty, but they find the system more than they can buck and are forced to withdraw their charges. The Jaguar has, of course, denied his guilt. Later, after he is beaten by a group of students not for his suspected act but because he was erroneously thought to have been the one who betrayed the students' clandestine activities, the change begins in him.

This is somewhat heroic medicine, but what Vargas is saying is that through having another's point of view forced upon him (breaking the encrustation his petty criminal past had formed), the Jaguar must take a perspective from which he begins to see anew. In his first rush of guilt he confesses the killing to the lieutenant who realizes because of a more subtle change in himself that it is too late for the confession to accomplish anything except the punishment of the changed Jaguar. That the latter becomes a bank clerk on graduation is one of the book's ambiguities; as with other fine writers, Vargas functions on more than a single level of meaning, while the epigraph from Sartre would seem to imply that the values of some of the book's events are those of existentialism.

Curiously, Vargas does less well by the physical environment than when he is engaged with the character subtleties of his people. Perhaps having grown up in Lima, the author finds the environment all too familiar. But he sees a mostly gray city, even when it is not hidden under the *garúa* (which the otherwise excellent translation persists in calling fog), whereas a young American woman saw Lima as a "slightly Indianized Paris." But then each saw with different eyes.

Mario Vargas Llosa.

