

*Luis Harss*

A City Boy

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I find it hard to write about Vargas Llosa; there is simply too much of him. And I cannot say, "this or that is what counts"; one must take his work as a whole, at flood tide, as it were. One can, perhaps, even skip a book or two; the driving force is still there. To me, in short, he means a certain kind of concentrated energy. Surely no Spanish American writer is more devoted or more successful in his Flaubertian singlemindedness. Looking over his work, one finds no blind gropings, no brilliant failures, only a constant flow, straight from the source. Few writers in our highly intellectual literature appear less self-conscious (in spite of his critical rationalizations). In his work everything seems immediately "given" at face value. A comfortable "social relevance" obscures the element of private fantasy. Yet there are those famous demons—the cadet hero's Romantic inner voices—raging to be heard.

My struggle with Vargas Llosa began in 1965, with *La ciudad y los perros*. We both lived in Paris; we met in his two rumpled rooms near the Odéon to tape an interview. He wore a dark mustache, had slightly buck teeth, seemed rather dour. A kind of shadow came with him. The wife of a well-known Argentine writer also living in Paris at the time had, in a peevish moment, dismissed his work as "fine for a writer from an underdeveloped country." I knew that *La ciudad y los perros* had won some kind of prize in Spain. I had mixed feelings about it (those were the early days of the "boom"). The mechanics annoyed me; I thought they were an ostentatious display of faddish "technique." I had heard, somewhere, that Vargas Llosa wrote "straight" and then split up his episodes and jumbled them (as if that made any difference). Then there was his rather unexpected rehabilitation of dog-eat-dog Naturalism. I thought—being the survivor of a tough though nonmilitary boarding school myself—that it was a terror tactic disguising a childish shock at the fact of human cruelty. As in *Los jefes* (whose title inevitably recalled Sartre's "Enfance d'un chef"), I though I detected a nostalgic glorification, and even an aesthetic,

of the gang code. In a word, I suppose I found the novel powerful but in some ways rather silly. I couldn't get upset, for instance, over adolescents torturing sick dogs or raping chickens (in my school it was sheep). The characters, in spite of their tough stance, seemed basically sentimentalized (and I think there remains this soft core in Vargas Llosa's work). Further, they were drawn along such simple lines as to be mere walking puppets on the one hand, verbal ectoplasms on the other. In short, the powers and complexities of the novel were in the shuffling and counterpointing of scenes rather than in dramatic structure. It seemed a therapeutic novel, an elaborate working out of personal traumas in slice-of-life disguise. Finally, there was the balancing act of the Epilogue, at once an empty spin-off and a wrapping up of loose ends. By then, for me at any rate, the law of diminishing returns had set in. Once I knew what was going on and who everyone was, I lost interest. Suspended literary space without dramatic progression, however it might purport to reflect a static social structure, did not work for me. It all, somehow, "came off" too neatly, in a collage of voices that led nowhere, because any part was equal to the whole. Even the creative energies of language were limited by an acceptance of its rhetorical patterns. The demons turned out to be childhood story ghosts. The predictable and rather dull human psychologies seemed mere conventions.

When I heard of the book being banned and even burned in Lima, I was surprised. To me it seemed to evolve in its own fantastic circle, quite detached from any political or social context, as a sort of black fairy tale, much closer, even in its violence, to romance than to the kind of documentary "realism" implied in its Naturalistic premises. I found the author, in a sense, like his work: driven but at the same time coolly organized in a world of tastes and opinions that buttressed him in his obsessions. His fanciful theory of the rise of the novel from the garbage of history (and the novelist as carrion eater feeding on the corpse of decaying society); his love of chivalric romance and distrust of humor (I remember his disapproval when I ventured the opinion that Dostoyevsky was a humorist); his melodramatic (and mechanistic) conception of human behavior, all disconcerted me so much that I forgot to turn on the tape recorder while he talked and had to ask for another session in which, according to my notes, he went over exactly the same ground, in a surprising repetition of opinions as neatly articulated—and uttered in the same dramatic whispers—the second time as the first.

Since then, of course, times have changed; masks have fallen. I realize my bias is a form of resistance to the impact of works that,

within their more or less tortuous “realism,” are much better than they ought to be. The mistake, in the sixties, was thinking of Vargas Llosa as a “total novelist” in the Tolstoyan sense. Certainly, by that measure—with its implied scope and depth—he falls short. There are no rounded characters; the range of emotions—urges and instincts would perhaps be more accurate terms—is pretty basic. Oddly enough, the elaborately “subjective” techniques—interior monologues, streams of consciousness—create atmosphere, not character. Even social types are often barely distinct in manner or details of speech or behavior that a reader can perceive. When Don Anselmo, for instance, toward the end of *La Casa Verde*, is revealed as a jungle man, the piece fits into the poetic scheme (one might almost say the color scheme) but does not reflect back on an understanding of the character or add to his specific weight. The fact that identities are constantly in flux tends to efface them. There is a play of surfaces rather than people, of textures rather than actions. The “total novel,” it soon appears, is not a teeming social canvas but a verbal substance of obsessive force, turning on itself. Out of this substance the characters are born as variations on a single theme of shadow being and loss of self in the metaphorical tide of the poem that grinds them to dust. The Vargas Llosan process is self-consuming. A single page, endlessly multiplied by syntactical devices, as in a series of exponential mirrors, could stand for each of his crowded volumes. The tapeworm he has spoken of grows fat on its own hunger and—as the characters, fulfilled only in their bloated dreams as they prey on the corpse of their defeat—dies of its own bloom.

In 1966—the year of *La Casa Verde*—Vargas Llosa was in Buenos Aires as a member of a literary jury. I worked for the magazine (*Primera plana*) that was cosponsoring the contest (with the Editorial Sudamericana), and we met again, briefly. The “boom” was now official; a high priest, Rodríguez Monegal, was there to consecrate it. As the youngest member of the “boom,” Vargas Llosa seemed its walking symbol. I remember Cuba was in the air—and Carpentier, who was declared a reactionary novelist because of his historical fatalism (however forward-looking he might be in his political ideology). There was also José Bianco, another member of the jury (and one of the writers “revived” by the “boom”), who had just been run off the editorial board of *Sur* by Victoria Ocampo for his Fidelista sympathies. In this atmosphere it was perhaps inevitable that the “Premio *Primera Plana*”—through Vargas Llosa’s insistence, some said, and possibly, according to others, because he was the only one to have read all the manuscripts—be given to an obscure Paraguayan novelist (Gabriel Casaccia), for his craft

and social conscience. I thought it was one of those bleak moments in which everyone was afraid to seem strange or eccentric. There was a party in the Alvear Palace Hotel, where Leopoldo Marechal, another survivor of political wars (he had been an unfashionable Peronista in the forties and fifties) managed to look very much like Borges (his deadly enemy). Among the books presented to the contest was Néstor Sánchez's *Nosotros dos*, whose literary terrorism went unsung.

By then I knew *La Casa Verde*; in fact, Vargas Llosa had been kind enough to show it to me in manuscript in Paris; and its Naturalist aura deceived me. In a sense, I suppose it was a jungle novel with the usual themes and characters (the "green hell's" familiar outlaws), but transfused with myth and a poetry of movement and literary reminiscence (Flaubert, Conrad) that enriched its central metaphor. I found its "straight" passages—Don Anselmo and the founding of the Green House—rather dreary, and others (the rape of Antonia) bloated and sentimental. But the jungle fantasy (Fushía's island dream, Aquilino's friendship, the tidal movement of shadowy figures up and down the river of life and death) was incandescent. At the time I didn't know of the brothel with the green shutters in *L'Education sentimentale* (where there is also a blind harpist, on a river boat), or of the famous seventeenth-century Tokyo brothel with 2,500 courtesans (the same that later inspired Utamaro) and also called the Green House, and it was these mysterious coincidences that eventually—and perhaps not totally irrelevantly—brought the book to life for me. The Naturalist saga, it turned out, was a fantastic romance of love ravished and friendship betrayed. The machista gang code of the Unconquerables (pimping filibusters blowing their brains out at Russian roulette) had its counterpart, or Romantic undertow, in the limpid and tender friendship of Fushía and Aquilino. The jungle ethic, in a sort of inverted metaphor—the aesthetics of the gang code raised to poetry—turned out to be a gentle bard's song of lost paradise.

A year went by; then there was *Los cachorros*, which I thought a noisy contrivance (another bloated horror story); and, somewhere in those years of constant Cuban crisis, the Rómulo Gallegos prize, which was noteworthy (according to the joke current at the time) for the confusion that ensued when the aging Gallegos thought he was to be the recipient rather than the honored deliverer of the prize, and for Vargas Llosa's controversial acceptance speech in which he managed to bite the hand that fed him. I forget his exact words, but they reflected the kind of maneuvering for position that went on in those days when writers thought they were social critics (in Argentina the left would soon be coming

around to backing Perón as a transitional figure on the road to the Socialist utopia). The story had a gossipy footnote: it was said that Vargas Llosa had invested the money of the prize in a Lima apartment house that soon burned to the ground. The flame (if it existed) seemed symbolic of the writer's burning bridges, in his struggle to remain independent of every "system." There was dignity—a dignity not always shared by other writers—and no little courage in Vargas Llosa's defense, during those "Cuban" years, of the writer's vocation, against all political odds. It was, of course, a defense of inner life, of the private self in exile from the demands of history (as defined by narrow ideologues). The writer, he said in various ways, was Camus's rebel, always on the fringes—sometimes the lunatic fringes—of the social order, a freeshooter in the shadows of the collective imagination. In his famous polemic with Angel Rama, for instance, during which much ink was wasted on both sides, he wore the dark cape of the carrion eater in an almost Baudelairean vindication of his "satanic Romanticism" over the "historical terrorism" of the neo-Marxist commissars of literature. The psychobiography of García Márquez that he developed in *Historia de un deicidio* was a portrait of the demon artist (in knight-errant dress) stalking the back alleys of the mind. The "autonomy" of the artist's "verbal world"—a system in its own right—had the obsessional quality of private fantasy.

Still, one must consider Vargas Llosa a "social novelist," if only because of the vast public screen on which he projects his fantasies, but also because of his highly "socialized" scale of values. In a sense, he is the least radical of Spanish American writers. He uses words as he hears them (there is none of the poet's distrust of language) and "plunders" reality as he sees it. His work is in shuffling the bits of the puzzle to heighten their effect, not in reordering perception. There is something institutionalized, even a bit bureaucratic, in the way he maps out his territory. The moralist is never far from the surface, not so much judging the situation or the behavior of the characters as imposing certain "realistic" priorities. It seems people behave in certain ways and clash on certain issues, and there can be no deviance from the basic pattern. Even deviance within the pattern (such as homosexuality in *Conversación en La Catedral*) is highly conventionalized. The result is that whole areas of experience, when not reduced to some behavioral formula, are blocked out. And yet, as I say this, I realize how unjust I am being in constantly falling back on my first impressions of Vargas Llosa, carried over from my reading of his early works. No doubt over the years he has opened himself to unexpected searches and seizures. *La ciudad y los perros* was, at least in underlying philos-

ophy, an almost totally behavioral novel. Its mechanics seemed a clear reflection of social and historical determinism (in what one might call the Sartrean variant of Faulknerian techniques). But, just as clearly, *La Casa Verde* breaks into areas of “nonhistorical” myth and metaphor. The “break” occurs, as it should, at the limits of perception, as we suddenly see through the phenomenological veil into the strangeness of mythical landscape. Oddly enough, the estrangement occurs not in the rather laborious “mythical” passages involving Don Anselmo and the Green House (which reduce myth to popular fantasy), but in the flowing mental scenery that carries us up and down the river with Aquilino and Fushía. The harpist, in a sense, belabors the Orphic theme; he “socializes” (or conventionalizes) it by making it too obvious (and thus losing much of his demonic stature). But in Fushía and Aquilino we hear a more shadowy music. They seem like mutants in the behavioral scheme, floating dream figures from some darker world. Even more surprising (to me at least) was the humor of *Pantaleón y las visitadoras*. A “situational” humor, to be sure, but one that nevertheless efficiently breaks down the Naturalist framework. It wasn’t so long ago that Vargas Llosa used to say he was immune to humor in literature. Just as he claimed man was totally conditioned by his historical and social environment. So, obviously, there are aleatory factors at work.

A certain distance can be measured, I think, between two of Vargas Llosa’s articles written about ten years apart. The first is his introduction to the 1967 Chilean edition of José María Arguedas’s *Los ríos profundos*; the second, a recent note (in *Inti, Revista de literatura hispánica*, no. 4, Autumn 1976) on Camus. In the first, Vargas Llosa is very much the city boy. I mean, an instinctively urban writer, with all the prejudices that implies. The city—whether Paris, Barcelona, or Piura—means time, history, social conflict. Escape from the laws of the concrete jungle is difficult. Private corners, inner visions, seem to lead outside history and its appearance of ultimate “reality.” For the Romantic Satanist this poses the constant danger—known to poets, madmen, and criminals—of spinning off into private fantasy. The Surrealist dream of a borderless community of being soon turns into a nightmare or an artificial paradise. Against these dark forces—the monsters engendered by the sleep of reason—the city stands fast. Compared to the mad bombings of poets, its conflicts, however violent, seem “real” and even—socially, historically—rational. And precisely the blind spot we find in Vargas Llosa at this time is his obsessive rationalism. Beyond the city, he senses, lie uncharted areas: the sexual jungle of the Green House; the “irrational” world of talking

plants of the nature poet. Ernesto, the protagonist of *Los ríos profundos*, in Arguedas's conception, is a boy torn from the natural order (as reflected in the communal life of the *ayllu*). He lives in his thoughts and memories, a misfit in white and mestizo society, listening to the voices of dead gods. Rivers, trees, mountains, and the music of a spinning top (and wandering harpists) speak to him with animistic fervor. Ernesto's communion with the natural order is part of an ethos, not mere poetic ornament. But for Vargas Llosa, this "exaggerated enthusiasm for nature," which "verges on mystic rapture," turns the boy into a sort of freak. Animism is clearly equated with alienation, not just from the surrounding society (which is Arguedas's point), but from some sort of rational scheme that Vargas Llosa subscribes to as fully as do the boy's tormentors. Thus, he dismisses Ernesto's "pagan idealization" of plants, objects, and animals, his "fatalistic irrationalism" and "disguised fetishism"—which he calls absurdist and superstitious—as "a sort of inheritance of his Indian spiritual half." On the whole, the short article damns Arguedas with faint praise and raises questions about Vargas Llosa's ability to cope with certain perceptions that might appear to shake the stability of our factual world of habit and prejudice, a world that relegates much that we know to unreality. But in the more recent article, Arguedas appears reincarnated—and rehabilitated—in Camus, the country boy for whom nature was the "primordial presence," bursting through the walls of cement and asphalt. "History does not explain the natural universe," Vargas Llosa quotes Camus, who opposed the "natural man" to his blighted city cousin. "It was perhaps this conviction," says Vargas Llosa, "that separated Camus from the intellectuals of his generation" who "all, Marxists or Catholics, liberals or existentialists, had something in common: the idolatry of history." Vargas Llosa might be speaking of himself in the sixties when he defines these intellectuals, with whom he identified in his early rejection of Camus, as all coinciding on one point: that "man is an eminently social being, and understanding his miseries and sufferings, as well as proposing solutions to his problems, is something that can only be undertaken within the framework of history." Camus, he goes on to say, rejected the "modern commandment" that reduces man's fate to historical imperatives. He blamed the city, with its concentration of political, economic, and ideological power, for the "historical absolutism" that had cut man off from his roots in other times and places. There is a man, Vargas Llosa suggests (as Camus did before him), outside history, capable of other forms of individual and communal life. In Camus-Arguedas—joined, as Vargas Llosa sees them, in their "mystical identification with the elements"

—this man was a nature worshiper. But he could also—in some future explosion of awareness on the part of an author who has yet to burst his last barriers—be one of the city’s mad bombers.

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