Captain Pantoja and the Special Service: **Mario Vargas Llosa's Comic Anarchy**

Peruvian Nobel Prize-winning novelist Mario Vargas Llosa is nothing if not prolific. From his debut novel, *The Time of the Hero* (*La ciudad y los perros*), published in 1963, to *Harsh Times* (*Tiempos recios*) in 2019, he has put out almost twenty novels, few of which could exactly be described as "slight," and many of which are ambitious, complex, and substantial. At the same time, Vargas Llosa has also written short stories, memoirs, plays (almost a dozen), book-length works of literary criticism (on writers from the nineteenth-century Frenchmen, Gustave Flaubert and Victor Hugo, to his own Latin American contemporaries, José María Arguedas and Gabriel García Márquez), at least one government-sponsored official report (into a massacre during Peru's civil war), some poetry, as well as innumerable essays, articles that have appeared in newspapers from Lima to Tokyo, Cape Town to Seattle, and all points in between, commentaries, manifestoes, reviews, forewords, epilogues, speeches, and so on. Along the way, he somehow made time to run, in 1990, for the Peruvian presidency. In addition to his many other awards and decorations (from honorary doctorates at Harvard and Yale to a hereditary peerage from the King of Spain, and most recently as the first non-Francophone writer to be elected to the Académie française), he can surely bid for the title of most industrious writer in Latin American literature.

What is more, Vargas Llosa's fictional output is notable for its variety of settings, themes, styles, and tones. He has set novels in all parts of Peru's diverse landscape (the coast, the mountains, and the rainforest), as well as in Brazil, the Dominican Republic, the South Pacific, Ireland and Central Africa, and elsewhere. They depict topics from bullying and social discrimination among schoolboys, to nineteenth-century millenarian religious movements, to a murder mystery in the desert (and another in the Andes), to Vargas Llosa's own first marriage with his aunt (more precisely, his uncle's sister-in-law). They are frequently experimental in style, employing for instance fractured narratives with multiple points of view, though despite this they are seldom as difficult, not to say impenetrable, as the work of some of his peers; for all his patrician hauteur, there is always a populist streak in Vargas Llosa's prose. And they range from historical epic to social critique, erotica to political thriller, melodrama to something like tragedy. But almost never are they trivial. Perhaps what unites them (or many of them, at least) is an attempt at diagnosis or even autopsy, to answer the question of "what went wrong?" One instance of this impulse is the famous semi-rhetorical question at the outset of the monumental *Conversation in the Cathedral* (*Conversación en la catedral*, 1969): "At what precise moment had Peru fucked itself up?" (3). *In Vargas Llosa's world, something is almost always fucked up—a death, a massacre, a marriage, a disappearance—and it is up to him or his characters to find out why and how.*

Captain Pantoja and the Special Service (*Pantaleón y las visitadoras*, 1973; the Spanish title literally means "Pantaleón and the Visitors," with the implication that it deals with official visitors, such as travelling inspectors) was Vargas Llosa's first comic novel. Its protagonist, the titular Captain Pantaleón Pantoja, is a Peruvian army quartermaster sent on a mission to tackle the dissolute behaviour of army personnel stationed in the country's Amazon region. Isolated, far from their wives and girlfriends, and supposedly fired up by the region's climate and food ("the warm humidity, that excess of nature" [6]), soldiers they have taken to harassing, even raping, local women, stirring up anger and indignation among the populace. Pantoja's task, then, is to establish a clandestine "special service" of army-funded prostitutes who will travel from base to base, providing a tacitly approved (but officially denied) outlet for the recruits' sexual desires. Pantoja, selected for the task because he is both a man without vices and a miracle of organization, immerses himself in this duty wholeheartedly—too much so for his long-suffering wife—assembling a roving squadron of sex-workers that is the very model of efficiency, with every visit calculated and calibrated to the tiniest detail. The cure, however, is worse than the so-called disease: demand for these special services is inexhaustible, and becomes a matter of public scandal when one of the prostitutes, Pantoja's favourite and his personal mistress (because in the end, even he cannot resist), is killed in a confrontation with civilians who want in on the action. With the secret exposed, the operation is dismantled, and Pantoja is sent to a new posting in the frigid *altiplano*, close to the Bolivian border at almost 4,000m above sea level, far from the libidinous Amazon.

The book's comedy comes from an incongruity of tone and theme: matters that are usually seen as playful or spontaneous (seduction, desire) are treated with great formality and subject to rigorous regulation. Bureaucratic rationality is obsessed with imposing order on wayward concupiscence. But this obsession becomes ludicrous (literally, play-like) and the second step of the joke is that order gives rise to a chaos of its own, as the "special service" threatens to soak up all the army's resources, literalizing the slogan "Make love, not war." The novel's danger, however, is that in what critic Michael Wood calls "its brilliant assault on seriousness" (55), it fails to take account of the fact that army bureaucrats fanatically following orders are not always funny, and that in the early 1970s, elsewhere in Latin America, other clandestine military units were generating a rather less comic anarchy, always in the name of order and progress.

1. Making Fun of Seriousness

It is not easy to write, or even talk, about humour. Just as a joke that requires explanation is not much of a joke, so explanations in general tend to annul what makes jokes funny. Similarly, it is hard to convince someone else that something is amusing: they either share your sense of humour or not, and if not, there is little to be done about it. Still, it is worth persevering and asking what makes us laugh (or not), even at the risk that we miss something essential through analysis, or that we are accused of taking a joke too seriously. After all, in *Captain Pantoja*, taking things too seriously is part of the point, and butt of much of the comedy. But how does this happen? What techniques does Vargas Llosa employ to make us laugh? Do they work for you, or not? What kind of humour is this? Have a think, put some ideas down in your notebook, and while you do that, I'll have a beer, but I'll be right back.

Drinks Pairing: Beer

One of the qualities recommending Pantaleón Pantoja for his mission is that he has no vices: "not a smoker, not a drinker, no wandering eye" (3). But paradoxically, to carry it out he has to immerse himself in a debauched demi-monde with which he is unfamiliar. Indeed, because he is to keep his distance from army installations, even his meetings with his handler, Lieutenant Bacacorzo, take place in "bars and brothels." As Bacacorzo puts it: "You'll have to hang out a lot in those places, won't you?" (14). Dutiful as always, the quartermaster heads for Iquitos's red-light district, starting at a place called the "Mau Mau," where he shows from the start his unfamiliarity with such establishments: "'Ahem. . . I mean hello,' Pantaleón Pantoja blows his nose, sits on the stool, leans on the bar. 'Yeah, a beer, please'" (17). Unsurprisingly, his evening's "research," meeting the Mau Mau's madam, whom he will later hire for the Special Service, leaves him reeling the following morning: "'My head is killing me,' Pantita curls up, covers himself with the sheets. 'My body is falling to pieces, I got the shivers'" (20). The alcohol reminds Pantoja that he, too, has a body, which may betray him as his mission progresses.

We may sometimes think that the pleasure of a joke comes from the fact that we are able to express something that is otherwise taboo or unmentionable. To put this another way: jokes provide cover for saying what otherwise should not be said, and our laughter comes from the shock of saying the unsayable. The seriousness of what is said can then be diluted with the excuse that we are "only joking," that because it is said "jokingly," it does not have the same force as if it were said "straight." Jokes, in short, allow for the release of inhibitions and their pleasure comes from the fact that, as Sigmund Freud puts it, at least momentarily we do not have to expend the "psychical energy" required to maintain the inhibition. In Freud's rather technical words: "the hearer of the joke laughs with the quota of psychical energy which has become free through the lifting of the inhibitory cathexis; we might say that he laughs this quota off" (*Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* 149). More simply: any time we are able to let our guard down, however briefly, the release of the energy that would otherwise be spent in keeping our guard up is felt as pleasurable. Again, we can also see this the other way around: in jokes we can briefly evade the censorship or repression (psychic but also perhaps political) that normally regulates what can and cannot be expressed. Like dreams, then, for Freud jokes offer a pathway to understanding the workings of the unconscious. They also return us, again briefly, to a state of childish play in which anything still goes, and before the adult demands of seriousness and decorum take hold. "*Play*," for Freud, is "the first stage of jokes," but it is "brought to an end by the strengthening of a factor that deserves to be described as the critical faculty or reasonableness" (128; emphasis in original). Humour reactivates that sense of play that we have otherwise lost—or, rather, repressed through reason or "reasonableness."

Captain Pantoja, however, does not quite follow this model. It makes fun of seriousness *through seriousness*, by taking formality to an extreme. It is not so much that it lifts repression as that it redoubles that repression via a bureaucratic use of euphemism that strains language to its limit. So the sexual act is redescribed as a "service"—in the original Spanish, the term used, "*prestación*," meaning "benefit" or "provision," is even more forced—while prostitutes become “visitors” (again, the Spanish *visitadoras* is so stilted as to be practically archaic) and so on. In Pantoja’s (and Vargas Llosa’s) hands, the language of bureaucratic order, or rational calculation, becomes delirious, feverish. In short, it is not just the male libido that (supposedly) gets out of hand in the tropics. The forces intended to contain (as Michael Wood notes, in both senses of that word: restrict and subsume [53]) that libido are contaminated with the same mania that they set out to combat. We laugh because we sense the pointlessness of repression, when it has to go to such lengths and only draws attention to its artificiality. Something will always escape.

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Pantaleón y las Visitadoras
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Lobby card for the 1976 film version of Mario Vargas Llosa’s novel

2. *Taking Fun Seriously*

At the risk of being accused of being a “killjoy” (but feminist Sara Ahmed’s “Killjoy Manifesto” dares us to take that risk), it is worth stepping back from this laughter, to ask what else we end up laughing at. Critic Sara Castro-Klarén, for instance, argues persuasively that as well as laughing at his bureaucratic zeal, at the same time we end up laughing at Pantoja "because he does not know how to behave like a true *macho*," unlike his superiors who, at the end of the novel, revert to the *status quo ante* of keeping a prostitute as a sexual respite on the side ("General Scavino unbuttons his fly" [240]). "We laugh," Castro-Klarén argues, "from a *machista* perspective" ("Humor and Class in *Pantaleón y las visitadoras"* 70). Moreover, in addition we find ourselves laughing from the centre at the periphery, from the viewpoint of the educated, white upper classes mocking the impressionable "*cholos*" (recently Westernized Indigenous people) or "*huachafos"* (the "lower class on its way up" [64]) for their naïve faith either in the forces of modernity (Pantoja) or in the millenarian cult that the novel portrays also to be sweeping the Amazon, a cult that finally puts paid to Pantoja's project.

In Castro-Klarén's words: "*Pantaleón y las visitadoras* satirizes the mental patterns of one social class (*cholos*) from the point of view of another (central power). The view is indeed from above. [. . .] The 'cosmopolitan' reader amuses himself with the uncritical melodrama and with the myopia of the *huachafitos* who aspire to tame a 'wild' country." Not that the top brass are spared, either, though here the point of view assumed is more international than national: "The satire from above presupposes an observer who sits one notch up from Lima in the class and power hierarchy, and whose 'natural' response, in view of the blunders of the *huachafo* 'modernizing' military, is amused laughter" (77-78). We laugh *at* the over-serious Pantoja, *at* his anxious and scandalized family, *at* the prostitutes he recruits, *at* the alternately outraged and envious civilians looking on, *at* the military officers who have cooked up this entire plan, and so on and so forth, all from the privileged space of some elsewhere that is certainly not Iquitos, and perhaps not even Peru; by the time of the novel's publication in 1973, Vargas Llosa had been almost entirely living outside of the country (in Barcelona, Paris, London, and elsewhere) for well over a decade, since 1959. He would not reinstall himself in Peru until 1974. Today, he is a Spanish citizen (and hereditary marquess), based mostly in Madrid.

At the same time, there is surely more than a little of the exceptionally industrious Mario Vargas Llosa in his creation, Captain Pantaleón Pantoja. Pantoja is, after all, also a writer, as his voluminous memoranda to his superiors attest. His mania parallels that of an author himself famous, as critic Wolfgang Luchting puts it, for "his organization, his extraordinary diligence, perseverance, discipline, his legendary dedication." Hence "Pantaleón Pantoja is one of the manifestations of Vargas Llosa himself, just as Madame Bovary 'is' Gustave Flaubert" ("Un recurso narrativo" 106). What is more, Pantoja's drive to organize everything, from food to sex, is not so far removed from Vargas Llosa's oft-stated and equally unachievable ambition to write a "total novel": "No author can achieve this, because their book would never end, unless it is stopped short at some given point, arbitrarily" (107). Similarly, then, there is nothing intrinsic to the organizing principle that will bring it to its conclusion—Pantaleón still hopes to expand the scope of his squadron's services to the civilian population even after the scandal has been exposed. There is a megalomania in authorship and in bureaucracy alike. After a decade of high seriousness, Vargas Llosa is also laughing at himself!

Another aspect to this book should be noted. Few critics have made much of the context of the novel's publication, but by 1973 Peru had been governed for half a decade by a military dictatorship under the command of General Juan Velasco Alvarado, who had taken power in a bloodless coup in October, 1968. This Peruvian dictatorship was decidedly anomalous: its leaders were modernizers and progressives who sought to side with the poor and bring a measure of justice to rural Indigenous communities. They restructured the educational system, introduced bilingual education (in Spanish and Quechua), and, most significantly, implemented South America's most far-reaching program of land reform, seeking to reduce the power of large landowners, expropriating haciendas and promoting agricultural cooperatives. Ultimately, however, they were caught in a contradiction. As José Miguel Oviedo puts it: "The revolutionary rhetoric of the military regime presupposed no less a contradiction than that which destroyed Pantaleón: the libertarian and humanistic socialism which these military men aspired to develop in Peru would be possible only if they, as a class or professional caste, disappeared" ("The Theme of the Traitor and the Hero" 22). Though set in the 1950s, then, Vargas Llosa's novel (which he researched on visits to the country in 1971 and 1972) is as much about Peru in the 1970s.

The problem is that, at exactly the same time, elsewhere in Latin America country after country was taken over by military regimes that shared few of these ideals of redistributive justice, though they did promise to bring "order" and progress, by violence if they felt the need. In Brazil, a coup d'état had brought the military to power in 1964. In

1973, there were coups in Uruguay and in Chile; in 1976, the armed forces seized power in Argentina. In all these countries (and elsewhere: Paraguay, for instance, and much of Central America), anti-democratic regimes were run by "soldier administrator[s]" as Pantoja describes himself. For Pantoja, a soldier-administrator is "every bit as important as an artilleryman or infantryman. [. . .] You laugh," he tells an old friend, but "I guarantee you that someday you'll be surprised. We'll function throughout the country with a flotilla of boats, buses and hundreds of specialists" (174-75). Beyond Peru, however, such clandestine units of special forces were indeed fanning through the countryside, as well as patrolling cities such as Buenos Aires and San Salvador, Santiago de Chile and Guatemala City. They sometimes used civilian clothes or vehicles (such as the feared Ford Falcons of the Argentine death squads) and official responsibility for the chaos they left behind was repeatedly denied. At least 5,000 people died, without the basic protections of legal due process, in the dirty war in Chile, 30,000 in Argentina, and tens of thousands more in Guatemala, El Salvador, Mexico, and elsewhere. Peru, too, would descend into similar (if, once again, somewhat *sui generis*) bloodshed in the 1980s, with a war against the Maoist Sendero Luminoso insurgency marred by atrocities on both sides. For many observers, especially in the early 1980s, Sendero seemed like a millenarian death cult (which we might imagine to be foreshadowed in the cult depicted in Vargas Llosa's novel), whose violence was without rhyme or reason; one of the group's first public actions was to hang dead dogs from lampposts in Lima.

In this context, what does it mean to depict clandestine military operations as a matter of fun, rather than fear? To feature a comic hero whose defence for the chaos he has caused is the fact that he was only following orders ("I organized this at the orders of my superiors. [. . .] I need to have bosses. If I didn't, I wouldn't know what to do" [231])? It is not that dictatorship and comedy cannot or should not mix—there is a long tradition of black humour as a means of survival and even resistance under intolerable conditions. But in *Captain Pantoja*, Vargas Llosa's humour is hardly black, even when one of the central characters dies in part as a result of Pantoja's enterprise getting out of control. In the novel, these are unintended consequences, no doubt. And there is no implication that Vargas Llosa is or was sympathetic to the dictatorships that gripped the region in the 1970s and 1980s, or the other forms of authoritarianism that lingered on thereafter. But nor is it clear that his humour offers resources for thinking about, let alone confronting, the violence waiting in the wings as he wrote his novel. Perhaps the real issue is not what went wrong in the past, but the dangers that still lie ahead.

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Song: “Welcome to the Jungle” (Guns N’ Roses)