

# The Invention of the Possible

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Vengeance makes for good literature. There is no way to settle the score—and who among us does not have some observation to make about his/her past and life?—, to narrate without concessions what did not but should have happened. We suffer to narrate our hardships, says Homer, and on the way, we correct the mistakes that life makes. We could add other elements: Melville, Conrad, Highsmith, and Dumas have taught us that the longer vengeance is put off, the better the story told. This means that time, cal-

culatation, and ill will toward a past, above all our own, add points so that the story becomes enjoyable and necessary: an act of poetic justice. A good pen has its influence, of course. I make that a given in the case of Vicente Leñero.

I am writing this and, as I do, I tell myself that I am doing it for myself. Probably when I finish this article it will not be in the orthodox form of a review. It is more like a lesson that is forcing me to think about why, since Leñero wrote *Gente así* (People Like That), I have the impression that he found—or rather was found by—his style. I know that he is the author of *Los albañiles* (The Construction Workers), that emblematic work that won the Premio Biblioteca Breve (Brief Library Prize) at a time when the authors of the Boom were winning it. And that with Julio Scherer in *Proceso* magazine, he re-founded forever the meaning of what it meant to be a journalist in a country like this one. And that he is one of the best, not to say the last of the Mohicans, of the old-style script writers who wrote with two hands—and not with the Greek chorus of

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the backer, the producer, the director, the cinematographer, the patron, the actors, and even a group of voyeurs in the background dictating the lines in what often ended up being a dialogue among the deaf—, who wrote well-crafted films. *El callejón de los milagros* (The Alley of Miracles or Midaq Alley in English) is a masterful script, one of the best pieces of evidence that a novel can be transferred to film and become a different, autonomous, perfect work. Leñero is a dramatist and a great chronicler. But the author that matters to me is the one who decided to write stories based on real cases in which he merged the tools of journalism, the essay, and fiction. He calls it “auto-journalism.” He did that perhaps to defend this last, un-renounceable space in which, by situating the first person as the protagonist, the sacred duty of putting before and above all the event just as it happened can be “left out.” Although I mistrust and am simultaneously fascinated by nomenclature, I like the term because by including the autobiography of the author, it speaks to the unavoidable conciliation between reality and fiction.

Already in *Gente así*, he makes reference to several “real” events that exist in the popular imaginary, whose unexpected outcome becomes perfectly possible thanks to the mastery with which they are narrated: the existence of a supposed unpublished novel by Juan Rulfo, *La cordillera* (The Mountain Range), in which he revealed the causes of his mystery. Or a famous chess encounter attended among others—and this seems incredible—the now departed and beloved Luis Ignacio Helguera, Daniel Sada, and Marcel Sisniega, “La apertura Topalov” (The Topalov Opening). In this exceptional story, chess champion Vesilin Topalov, Leñero’s former student, whom the teacher had cut to ribbons a literary workshop, takes his revenge. The theme of the teacher who destroys reputations and must pay for it later appears in different ways as an inescapable weight that comes with the job of someone who, to help an aspiring writer, inevitably becomes his/her executioner. His stories rooted in what are called “hard facts” end up with something fantastic, a product of pure invention, and thanks to the polished technique and natural cadence

of the dialogues, they become more real than the real and betrayed journalism in order to be true to their loyalty to literature. Magnificent stories that made me think how great it was that Leñero decided to write this false chronicle of our time.

Today, with *Más gente así* (More People Like That), I celebrate the fact that he continued in this vein, writing up moments of his fake—or real—autobiography. Agile, tragicomic, and with a great deal of acid, he portrays a society with more than two faces, where the manager of the newspaper “that reports on the life of the nation” can make you a member of the honorable editorial board and steal your etchings at the same time.<sup>1</sup> Or where Carmen Balcells, the literary agent who grew her bank account and her humanity thanks to the pens of García Márquez and Vargas Llosa, spends her days always smiling at Leñero, courting him, without promoting him, in a dance worthy of Freud at his best.

In an interview with *Proceso* magazine requested by Julio Scherer, Leñero deals with a writer of the stature of Graham Greene, who refuses to answer the Catholic journalist because, as the author of *The Power and the Glory* says, “Catholic journalists don’t ask me about literature, about my literature; they ask me about theology, metaphysics, the Vatican. . . or about my faith, like you.” They are out for sensationalism; the story. He suspects that Leñero is after the headline, “Graham Greene Loses His Faith.” Greene didn’t give the interview because he was indignant about journalism—a profession he exercised himself—and at the same time did give it because his diatribe speaks to the issues that Vicente Leñero was most interested in; yet another piece of proof of the mastery with which he can convince us of something that didn’t happen . . . or maybe did. And along the way, he situates us in the aesthetic moment in which this happened, an era in which Greene was scorned by Latin American critics, except for García Márquez, who was not only an exceptional writer, but also an exceptional reader.

The literary motifs in which authors, readers, and characters meet appear in several stories. In “¿Quién mató a Agatha Christie?” (Who Killed Agatha Christie?), Poirot allows himself the luxury of judging his creator’s oeuvre at the same time that he decides that his own life is a disaster and his professional career as a detective, a failure; that he himself is a pedant, insufferable, a simple puppet who presents himself as a deductive machine. He feels inferior to other professionals in his field like Simenon’s Maigret or Chandler’s Philip Marlow. His useless existence is the fault of the mediocrity of his author, who was more ingenious in constructing Miss

Marple. The old Pirandellian issue and the idea of the creator who, faced with his/her creatures, in the best of cases according to Borges, has fun, constructing labyrinths where dialogue and issues meet that only the experienced reader can unravel.

There are other characters absolutely unknown even to the author. His mother, for example. That enigma through which the author tries to find a point in common. The son who never saw his mother kissing his father; the son she never caressed—though she didn't pinch or spank either—; to whom one day he gave a pair of hair combs and she responded, "I already have a pair." A mother who gave him "milk, not honey," who offered him "her presence, not her heartbeat," and who, now in his old age, he discovers himself to be almost identical to.

Since Tom Wolfe invented that thing called the "New Journalism," using the first person, which can give greater potential to the experience without betraying it, as opposed to the former canon of "objectivity"—as though such a thing

were possible—, he convinced many, more or less successfully, that it is really possible to separate spaces, genres, to speak of a non-constructed memory, to believe in fixed identities. But in a nomadic era like ours, it seems to me that that is where the center of the debate lies, a topic I will leave for another time.

I like the fact that a journalist who believes in the sharp differences between one genre and another is the person who wrote these two volumes. I am happy that a novelist has resorted to journalistic techniques to make an audaciously imaginative and perfectly possible world a reality. Because by hiding methods forged throughout a lifetime dedicated to literature, he shows not only that people "are like that," but also that, if he decides it will happen, there will be many, many more people like that. **MM**

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The newspaper "that reports on the life of the nation" was the way the Mexico City daily *Excelsior* referred to itself. [Translator's Note.]