

Giving Voice to Those Without One

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Few works by Mexican writers show more than those of Vicente Leñero the propensity to universalize that is nestled in the best fiction, that voracity with which he wanted to devour the world, history past and present, the most grotesque experiences of the human circus, the most contradictory voices transmuted into literature. This uncommon appetite for telling and hearing everything, for embracing all of life in a fine-tuned narration or in a courageous journalistic report, so infrequent in a milieu usually ruled by whispers and timidity.

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Leñero successfully made inroads into practically all genres, perhaps with the exception of poetry, and he has been honored for all of them: short stories, novels, theater, film and television scripts, interviews, journalistic chronicles. He was one of the most innovative, provocative playwrights of his generation, as well as the best-paid film script writer of his time.

The teacher of many generations of theater and film writers, a large number of the authors whose works have filled our country’s theaters and movie houses and been given international awards and honors paraded through his workshops. From the trenches of *Excelsior* and *Proceso*, side by side with Julio Scherer, he fought definitive battles for free journalism committed to the truth and society’s best causes.

Vicente Leñero studied with Lasallian Brothers and then majored in civil engineering at the UNAM and journalism at the Carlos Septién García School. All these circumstances marked his literary vocation in terms of form and of content, as well as the topics he picked and the structures he chose to

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write in. Leñero always remained faithful to the student he had been, but only with the starting point of the vocation that marked him. Because literature is a passion, and passion is exclusionary.

The writer's condition is strange and paradoxical. His/her privilege is freedom, the freedom to see, hear, find out everything. What for? To feed the internal demon that possesses him/her, that is nourished by his/her acts, experiences, and dreams. When Leñero studied with the Lasallian Brothers or in the schoolrooms of the School of Engineering, he may not have supposed that he was absorbing facts, ideas, and impressions that he would then transform into his singular conception of literature. Because, for him, just like for any other writer who really is a writer, writing was more important than living.

So, from the microcosm of family life, Leñero extracted plays and novels: *La mudanza* (The Move), *La visita del ángel* (The Angel's Visit), *¡Pelearán diez rounds!* (They'll Fight Ten Rounds!), *Qué pronto se hizo tarde* (How Quickly It Got Late), *La gota de agua* (Drop of Water); from his work in television, a novel, *Estudio Q* (Studio Q), and a play, *La carpa* (Music Hall Revue). From his familiarity with history, he penned the works *El juicio* (The Trial), *El martirio de Morelos* (The Martyrdom of Morelos), and *La noche de Hernán Cortés* (The Night of Hernán Cortés). From his interest in religious life sprang another novel and another play: *Redil de ovejas* (Sheep Pen) and *Pueblo rechazado* (People/Town Rejected). From his experience as a journalist came *Nadie sabe nada* (Nobody Knows Anything) and the novel *Asesinato* (Murder), plus reports that he collected in books like *Talacha periodística* (The Journalist's Job) and *Periodismo de emergencia* (Emergency Journalism).

However, sometimes we forget that Leñero began in a genre that he would only occasionally frequent later: the short story. In 1959, he published "La polvareda" (The Cloud of Dust), strongly influenced by Juan Rulfo. Two years later his first novel appeared, *La voz adolorida* (The Pain-stricken Voice), which he much later rewrote under the title *A fuerza de palabras* (Through Words), in which he delved into one



of the most frequent themes in his literature, confession, or the possibility of redemption using the word (spoken or written, in a book or on a stage).

The publication of *Los albañiles* (The Construction Workers), the winner of the 1963 Seix Barral Prize, marked the real beginning of his literary career and opened up a new path for Mexican letters. For a great work of fiction to be just that, it must add something to the world, to life, something that had not existed before, which thanks to it and only from its publication on will become part of what we call reality, both in the daytime and in our dreams. In *Los albañiles*, the author gave characters who lacked a voice in the world of fiction their citizenship papers. But the most important thing was that they inscribed themselves in a theme that was practically unprecedented in Mexican letters: the Catholic novel, as it has come to be called.

Before Leñero, this genre among us only included such lesser lights as Alfonso Junco or Emma Godoy, incapable of inscribing it in a literature of high quality that would have given it validity. Leñero's first achievement, it seems to me, was to delve into the theme of evil with all of its upheaval and starkness, more than with the apologetic paintings in the devotional novels that we faithful are so prone to read.

In *Los albañiles*, Mexican readers found what a Graham Green in England or a Georges Bernanos in France could write in their books: the presence of evil among men, a theme that has systematically been avoided throughout this century, masking it with the arguments of science, politics, psychology, and even metaphysics. But evil can also be a real, physical, biological presence that causes pain and can be felt and that only a few novelists have managed to give corporeality in their books.

The attentive reader of *Los albañiles* discerns that, beyond the overt drama, another is developing. A kind of hidden

counterpoint resonates in the most insignificant gestures, in the smallest words, in the constant questioning. It is immediately perceptible that the atmosphere is inhabited by another presence —another Presence. From an intricate police procedural, the novel jumps to become a theological problem about guilt and the quest for truth. Who killed Don Jesús, the old, drunken, epileptic night watchman? Everyone had a reason to do it. At the end of the book, the involved reader feels chills down his or her spine: he/she was missing as the book's protagonist; he/she only needed to have asked him/herself sincerely.

After *Los albañiles*, *La vida que se va* (The Life that Is Ending) seems to me Leñero's best-honed novel, although I have a very positive memory of *Estudio Q* (Studio Q), in which a pair of television actors rebel against the script that the director/God tries to impose on them from his cubicle above. Because, curiously, Leñero's characters are never very sure of their beliefs and sometimes their faith seems more like a

heavy burden to us, a burden they would like to shrug off more than a soothing spiritual relief. Suffice it to remember the character from *El garabato* (The Squiggle), who in the novel's last lines concludes that Christ was probably not God, with all the disillusionment that this implies for a Catholic.

That fully and tragically human imagination is what inscribed Vicente Leñero in a prominent place in the history of literature in our language. Vicente began writing in our magazine seven years ago —he made 98 contributions— and there is no doubt that his participation lent it importance and high literary and journalistic quality. There were those, he told me, who bought the magazine just to read Leñero's column. The absence in Mexican letters of "Lo que sea de cada quien" (Whatever from Everyone), whose closest predecessor is *Gente así* (People Like That) will be a determining factor for the publication's future. It leaves an empty space that is impossible to fill, just as does the beloved friend and teacher that Leñero always was to me. **MM**

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