

PREFACE: A HISTORY OF THE LUMINOUS NOVEL

I am not sure of the exact origin, the initial impulse that drove me to attempt the luminous novel, although the beginning of the first chapter expressly states that this initial impulse derives from an obsessive image, and that the image is explicit enough as to allow the reader to believe in it without any vacillation whatsoever. I myself would need to believe in the image unequivocally, for I remember well both the image and my obsession with it, or at the very least my infatuation, which lasted long enough to suggest the idea of obsession.

My doubts probably refer to the fact that at this very moment, in evoking such an image, another image appears before me, one completely distinct from the first, as the actual source of the initial impulse. According to this second image, the initial impulse arose from a conversation with a friend. I had narrated to him a personal experience of great transcendence and then explained the difficulty in translating such an experience into writing. According to my theory, certain extraordinary experiences cannot be recounted without losing their original charm; basically, it is impossible to bring them on to the page in their entirety. My friend, however, insisted that if I wrote it down exactly as I had told it to him that night, then I

would have a beautiful story; and that not only could I write it, but that that to do so was my duty.

Come to think of it, these two images are not mutually exclusive. Confirmed by a close reading of the first lines in the first chapter—a close reading that I myself have just now realized before commencing this very paragraph—these images together could have given birth to the novel. It seems at first there existed two river sources, though they did not mix because I still did not know when I began the novel that I was writing about the transcendent experience I had told my friend. I start by writing about the obsessive image, which has to do with the special disposition one needs to write literature, and then I write about a parallel yet distinct desire to write the sort of experiences I categorize as “luminous.” It isn’t until a few lines later that I ask myself if the subject (the obsessive image) wasn’t in fact this parallel desire. But in the novel my friend is never mentioned, which to me seems unfair—despite us not being friends anymore and despite how, according to what I’ve heard, he goes around spreading lies about me. It is very likely that when I started the novel I would have completely forgotten my friend’s recommendation, authorization, or insistence and been convinced that it was my own desire to write the story all along.

What now calls my attention, given how much time has passed, is that I see so clearly the cause and effect between my friend’s insistence and my later belief that the desire was my own.

First, my friend imposed upon me the task of writing a story I knew was impossible to write, imposing it as a duty no less. The imposition lingered for some time, working from the shadows, sharply rejected by my conscious mind, and emerging from under that obsessive image after having quietly erased its footprints. Thankfully it did, for as we know imposition generates resistance. And to eliminate this resistance my friend's imposition from the outside had to enter dressed as if it had been a desire from the inside. Granted, of course, the desire may have existed before the imposition, since for some reason I told my friend what I had told him when I told him; perhaps I knew subconsciously that my friend would find a way to oblige me to attempt the impossible, to recount my transcendent experience. A note: I believed it impossible back then and I continue to believe it impossible now. Nevertheless, the fact that it felt impossible back then was not sufficient enough reason not to do it, that much I knew. It's just that I was too lazy to attempt the impossible on my own; I needed a push from friend.

Perhaps he was right, but for me things are never so simple. Now I see myself—imagination dressed as memory—simply writing the story I had told my friend, just as I had told him, and then feeling like I had failed; I see myself tearing to shreds the five or six sheets of paper that would have tried to capture such the retelling. In a sense that was the novel's first draft, and it is very likely that my memory

of its existence be authentic, though not a single trace of it remains among my papers. That memory of tearing up the first draft must have given rise to the obsessive image that led me to rewrite it, a memory reminding me to finish what I had started. And after writing about the initial image a second time, the initial desire must have transformed into the desire to write about other transcendent experiences too, like scaling them one by one in an attempt to reach the one I wanted to (or should) write about: That first one I had most likely written and most likely destroyed. What I mean to say is that in the back of my head I believed my failure to retell the luminous event might be due to a lack of context, of surrounding, of climate, the kind that could be derived from an abundance of images and words that would reinforce the effect the anecdote should provoke in the reader.

That is when things got out of hand, though, because all that climate and images and words took me on unexpected paths, no matter how logical; a similar process of contextualizing luminous events is marvelously explained in *Las moradas*, by St. Theresa of Ávila, my patron saint, but we know that to explain a process is not enough; there is no other way but to live it yourself, to live and learn, though in doing so you will make mistakes and lose heading. I believe that in the preserved chapters of the luminous novel the heading is lost almost immediately, and the five long chapters taken together represent nothing but the forced attempt to find my way

again. Forced, yes, but also worthwhile, especially if we account for the circumstances that accompanied and surrounded it and ultimately mutilated it.

It's that I too had to be mutilated, and I was. The majority of the events forming the circumstances that led me to write the luminous novel, had to do with my then future gallbladder operation. After accepting that I unavoidably had to undergo the surgery, I argued with my surgeon to postpone the date as much as possible—successfully attaining an adjournment of several months. In those months I finished editing four books that had been long overdue, while also hurling myself into the fury of writing the five chapters of the luminous novel. Obviously I was afraid of dying on the operating table. Writing the luminous novel, for me, symbolized the intention to exorcise this fear of death. I also attempted to exorcise the fear of pain through my writing, but this I did not accomplish. The fear of death, yes; I wouldn't say I went calmly to the surgery, for I was still afraid of the pain, but having written those five chapters (that in reality had been seven), the idea of death no longer made me tremble. Dread before the face of death paralyzes me from time to time, especially when things are going well for me, but to that gallbladder operation I went with my head held high. And as far as writing the luminous novel, the idea of death certainly motivated me to work against the clock, like a man possessed. I managed to get my

affairs in order, that is, my literary life's work, while all other matters were set aside. It was during this interim before the operation that I amassed a debt, considerable for me at the time, and this debt is what later drove me to work in Buenos Aires, to pay it off.

The ultimate mutilation hadn't occurred to me yet, the day of the operation, though the operation was itself an important mutilation in that I was left without a biliary vesicle. What's worse is that I left the operation with the secret conviction that I had suffered a castration. Much later I was freed from such secret conviction—when the secret became not so secret—during a dream. In the dream the doctor who had directed me to the surgeon handed me my gallbladder in perfect condition inside of a jar. The gallbladder, whose true form was unknown to me, in the dream looked very much like the apparatus of masculine genitalia. The serpent bit its tail.

In the beginning, I had a hard time accepting the thought of surgery and resisted it as much as possible. The doctors had been forthright about the operation, but then again doctors are always forthright, especially surgeons who, we all know, charge quite nicely for their work. Bernard Shaw said something similar once, and I openly share his view: he signaled the absurdity of deciding to undergo an operation recommended by the surgeon who is himself in charge of the operation and thus stands to make good money. Not operating

would have been a clearer option, if it weren't for the recurring infections that afflicted my gallbladder with greater and greater frequency and made me feverish and afraid of a more dangerous turn for the worst. At last the answer came by way of a book. How strange is it that every time I confront a difficult issue, there magically appears before me the right information at the right time. I was rummaging through books, as is my custom to, in search of crime novels on a discount table at a bookstore on *18 de Julio* Avenue. Suddenly my eyes fell upon a title that seemed to glimmer: "DON'T OPERATE IN VAIN," it was called, and if not that then by something similar. The book was not cheap, and it wasn't like I had money to spare. So I didn't purchase it. Nevertheless, when I returned home the idea of buying the book still swirled in my mind. Buying a book that was new (though on a discount table, this particular book was indeed new) and that wasn't crime fiction, fell too far outside my beliefs and habits, not to mention economic possibilities. And yet I was home and still thinking about that book. Still thinking about it the next day, and the next. Finally I made up my mind and returned to the book store, held the book in my hand again, but this time figured I might not need to buy it; I turned to the index and saw there was a chapter on gallbladders. The chapter wasn't long, plus I usually read quickly anyway, and the rest of the book didn't matter to me. Side-eyeing to make sure no booksellers were paying too close attention to me, I opened the book almost

with disinterest, as someone who would skim the pages of a book before deciding to buy it or not, and I turned to the first page of that gallbladder chapter. The first lines resolved everything; it began by saying gallbladder operations are, in most cases, necessary. Then it went on to suggest ways to avoid an operation if one so chose—distinct ways of control the nervous system of the vesicular channels through intention, so as to allow the flow to come and go of your own free will, without blocking the channel's sphincter, and other things of that nature—but finally the chapter ended by comparing a bad gallbladder to a ticking time bomb that could explode at any moment, and that an emergency operation, all in all, isn't the best way to undergo a procedure. I closed the book, left it in its place on the sales table and headed home, ruminating the acceptance to operate, the fact that it had to happen.

I would handwrite the luminous novel and, after finishing a chapter, pass it through a typewriter. Of course in typing each chapter I introduced tiny changes and made corrections here and there. Only one chapter was originally written on a typewriter I believe. While another chapter, after typing it, was later disparaged and destroyed. But as the reader who gets that far will note, I eventually regretted my decision and summarized the chapter in the one that replaced it; but as it turned out I had only destroyed a copy and so I retyped the original and again positioned it in its place. But, in confusion, I also

kept the summary in the chapter that had replaced it, and at some point the numbering of the chapters got out of hand. After countless edits and revisions, I am not sure when those five surviving chapters took their present; I've been carrying this truncated novel for sixteen years, every once in a while bullying myself into a new revision, always to add or subtract some things.

In 2000 I received a fellowship from the Guggenheim Foundation to complete the final corrections to those five chapters and write the new ones necessary to complete the project. The final edits were realized, but not the new chapters, while the fluctuations of the year in which I enjoyed the fellowship are narrated in the prologue of this book. During the fellowship year, from July of 2000 to June 2001, I did manage to give form to a story titled "First Communion," which aimed to be the sixth chapter of the luminous novel, though ultimately didn't even come close to completing it. Also the prologue, "Fellowship Diary," could be considered a continuation of the luminous novel, but only from a thematic point of view.

I thought of combining all my writings that are pertinent to this book, including the ones contained in my other books, specifically *Diary of a Bastard* (1972) and *The Empty Discourse* (1996) since those texts are in some sense a continuation of the luminous novel. But the prospect seemed excessive, and in the end I opted to limit this latest project exclusively to unpublished

material. Still today, and probably still forever, there remains yet to be written a series of crucial chapters, among them the anecdote I had told my friend that had given birth to the luminous novel.

Alas, I was right: the task was and is impossible. There are things one simply cannot recount. This whole book is a testament to one grand failure. Even writing the prologue, my attempt to create a context for the novel's luminous experiences, has led me down dark and even gloomy paths. In the process of writing I have lived through innumerable catharses, recuperated sums of fragments that had been buried in my unconscious, and cried over some of what I should have cried over long ago. No doubt, for me, it has been a worthwhile experience. In a way, rereading might even be considered therapeutic. It stirs me. Though I stress, nonetheless, luminous experiences, once narrated, cease to be luminous; they deceive and appear trivial. They are not accessible to literature, or at the very least not my literature.

I believe, in the end, the only light found within these pages will be the one lent to it by the reader.

M.L.

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