

Mario Vargas Llosa, *A Writer's Reality*  
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## Discovering a Method for Writing

Sartre, Military School,  
and *The Time of the Hero*

The process of writing is something in which a writer's whole personality plays a part. A writer writes not only with his ideas but also with his instincts, with his intuition. The dark side of a personality also plays a very important role in the process of writing a book. The rational factor is something of which the writer is not totally aware. And so when a writer gives testimony about his books, he does it in a particularly subjective way. He gives a clear picture of only what he wanted to do, which rarely coincides with what he actually did. That is why a reader is sometimes in a better position to judge what a writer has done than the writer himself.

My novel *La ciudad y los perros* was given the English title of *The Time of the Hero*. I must say I did not like it because *The Time of the Hero* does not give the same idea as the original title. But the title was chosen by my publisher. When I suggested "The City and the Dogs," he said that that title was not at all catchy; and so we gave the novel a more catchy title. But *The Time of the Hero* is not a real equivalent of the original title. I wrote this novel, which was my first (I had previously written a book of short stories), between 1958 and 1961. It took me three years to write this book, and it was an important experi-

ence because I discovered many things about literature and about myself, and I learned a method for writing that I have been practicing ever since in all my novels and other books. I learned two very important things about myself as a writer during the course of writing this book. First, personal experience is always the raw material for what I write. All my fiction—short stories, novels or plays—began as personal experiences. I wrote those works because something happened to me, because I met someone or read something that became an important experience for me. I am not always aware of the reasons why a particular experience remains in my memory with such vividness, nor why an experience gradually becomes a source of encouragement to invent or fantasize about. But all my fiction begins that way.

Among Latin American writers whom I admire and who also write directly from their personal experience is my fellow Peruvian José María Arguedas, who is not so well known abroad. He was an important writer, an interesting novelist and short-story writer and also an anthropologist. He had an intimate knowledge of Indian culture, something that very few writers have in Latin America; and he wrote interesting essays about Indian culture, about the Indian world. He was born in an Indian community and did not move to the white community until he was seventeen. All his books are a reconstruction of this Indian world that he knew intimately in his childhood. I read him with great admiration, and he probably had some influence on what I have written—particularly his first novel, *Los ríos profundos* (Deep Rivers), which was a great success in Peru, where it was first published. Although his experience is unique in Peruvian literature, there are other Latin American writers who had similar experiences in their own country: the Mexican writer Juan Rulfo, who also had direct experience in an Indian culture; and Roa Bastos, the Paraguayan writer, because in his books you can see that he had an intimate experience of the native world.

The personal experience that provided the raw material for

*The Time of the Hero* was the time I spent at a military boarding school, called Leoncio Prado, in 1950 and 1951, when I was fourteen and fifteen years old. I must tell you something about this school and about Peru at that time. Peru was and is a stratified society of not one country but many countries coexisting in a nation, with people belonging to these separate countries having little communication with each other. If, like me, you were a Peruvian born into a middle-class family and living in a middle-class district of Lima, you had a limited idea of what Peru was as a country, as a society. You might think that Peru was a country of white people, of westernized, Spanish-speaking people with a civilized and even prosperous way of life. You knew, of course, that Peru was also an Indian country, but you had no opportunity to see even one Indian if you were living in Lima, in Miraflores, a fashionable, middle-class district in the 1940s and early 1950s, because the Indians were practically all in the countryside, in the Andean region or in the outskirts of the city where a young boy of a middle-class family never went.

Thus my idea of Peru as a boy was distorted and restricted. I suppose this was more or less the experience of most Peruvians. Everybody lived secluded in a small world of his own with practically a total ignorance of what life was for other Peruvians. We were surrounded by a world of ignorance and prejudice that we took for granted was objective reality.

The divisions in Peru were many. First, racial: there was the Peru of white people, the Peru of Indian people, the Peru of the blacks, and the small minorities of Peruvians, the Asians and the people from the Amazon region. Second, there was the division between urban Peru and rural Peru, which are two separate worlds, completely different in customs and rituals, in the rhythm of life, and also in language because in the cities Spanish was spoken while in the countryside it was mostly Quechua or Amara, the native languages. Third, there were geographical and regional divisions, very strong today but even more so thirty-five years

ago, among the coastal area, the Andean region, and the jungle of the Amazon. These three geographical worlds are like three different countries in Peru.

At that time there were very few institutions in which the whole country was represented. One of those rare institutions, really representative of all the complexity and the different social, cultural, and racial groups, was this military school, Leoncio Prado. It was a secondary school for only the last three years. It had been created in the late forties, and for several reasons there were young boys in the school from all social and economic classes. There were boys from the upper class who were sent there by their parents as a kind of reform school. They were difficult boys, rebels, difficult to control, who were sent there because their families considered that military discipline would be good for rebellious young people. There were many boys from the middle class who went to Leoncio Prado as preparation for a military career. They wanted to be naval officers, for instance, and thought that this institution would be a good training school for them. There were also many students from the lower class, even from the most humble and poorest families of the country. The first one hundred students who passed the entrance exam received a grant exempting them from tuition, and this policy opened the school to very poor boys from peasant families and workers' families and even boys from the slums, from the outskirts of Lima. So all the races and social classes and even regions of Peru were represented in the school, which was in a way a sort of microcosm of what Peru was.

The boys were between thirteen and sixteen years of age, and they all brought their own world to the school—their prejudices, their rituals, their particular vision of what Peru was. All these visions were competing one with the other. All the boys were subject to military discipline because the idea of the school was to provide both military instruction and academic education. When they finished school, the cadets received a reserve

officer's diploma, which exempted them from military service. The school was put under the administration of one of the branches of the army, the infantry. We were organized like an army battalion and received very strict and serious military training as well as an academic education. I must say that this experience was important in my life. Now that I look back, I am grateful to the military school because I discovered what the real Peru was, of which I had no idea before I went to Leoncio Prado. But the experience was extremely hard for me. It was a kind of trauma. I had had a very protected childhood; my family spoiled me a great deal. And so when I went to the military school, I thought life was extremely kind; I had no idea that life could also be violence and brutality, that social, racial, and economic differences could mean real war among people. I had no idea that military discipline, the exaltation of military values, manhood, "machismo," and physical deeds could become something so violent and brutal.

I was shocked and terrified during the first weeks, maybe months, in that military school. On the other hand, in spite of the fact that I suffered considerably with the seclusion and all the violent rituals involved in military training, I enjoyed the school in one way. I learned how to read. I had always been fascinated with adventure and read novels of adventure voraciously. To learn how to read was extremely important in my life, particularly because I discovered this extraordinary possibility of experiencing an adventurous life through the fiction I read.

I suppose from an early age I dreamed of having an adventurous life, like that of one of the heroes of the novels of Salgari,<sup>1</sup> Jules Verne, or Alexandre Dumas—authors I read with enormous passion. This military boarding school was my first

1. Emilio Salgari (1863–1911). Italian writer whose novels were widely translated into Spanish. Among his works are *Carthage in Flames* (1908) and *The Accursed Man* (1916).

real adventure in life. Until then I had only fictitious, vicarious adventures through reading books, but the military school was a real adventure, brutal and violent but an adventure similar to those fictitious ones. The idea that I was becoming a sort of protagonist of an adventure similar to those fictitious adventures was something that helped me resist and tolerate the experience of being a cadet in a military school.

From my first weeks at the school, I knew that one day I would write a novel based on that experience. I immediately felt that that kind of experience was what I needed in order to write my own novel of adventure. And that is what I did. But it was impossible for me to do it when I was living that experience or immediately after. This fact was something I also learned from this first novel—that I needed personal experience to invent, to fantasize, to create fiction, but at the same time I needed some distance, some perspective on this experience in order to feel free enough to manipulate it and to transform it into fiction. If the experience is very close, I feel inhibited. I have never been able to write fiction about something that has happened to me recently. If the closeness of the real reality, of living reality, is to have a persuasive effect on my imagination, I need a distance, a distance in time and in space.

Thus it was with *The Time of the Hero*. I tried to write a novel based on that experience when I was in Lima at the university. I could not do it, even though I tried many times. But in 1958 I won a scholarship to Madrid to do my Ph.D. dissertation and started to write the novel immediately after arriving in that city. Six years separated me from Leoncio Prado, and there was, of course, the enormous physical distance between Madrid and Lima.

I said before that I discovered a method for writing, a method I have been practicing since then in all my novels and plays. The method is more or less the following. For me the most difficult part, the most difficult aspect is the beginning. It is especially

difficult because I need to fight against my insecurity, which I doubt that I can ever overcome. The only way I can break this depressing situation is to write in an almost mechanical way, similar to what the surrealists call automatic writing. First, I always write a draft version of the novel in which I try to develop, not the story, not the plot, but the possibilities of the plot. I write without thinking much, trying to overcome all kinds of self-criticism, without stopping, without giving any consideration to the style or structure of the novel, only putting down on paper everything that can be used as raw material, very crude material for later development in the story.

As I begin writing a novel I have a general idea of what the story is going to be. I have some trajectories in mind, that is, the chronology of the action. One character starts here and finishes there, for example. I have this kind of information about the characters, a general outline of the story. But I never respect this outline, this plan. I need some general scheme, but I know that I will change it in many ways. What I enjoy in writing a novel is to discover the possibilities of a story. I know that my original idea for a story is going to be only the point of departure for something that will push me in an unexpected way. And that is what I enjoy, that is what I like when I write a book, to discover that something has been pushing me in a direction that I could not expect when I started. I consider that I have finished a book when I am so tired of rewriting it that I cannot stand the idea of continuing to work on it. Occasionally, I have been asked whether, after a number of years, I reread my work. I never do. Sometimes, when I am helping a translator, I go back to an episode. But I do not like to reread anything in its entirety because I always feel that I could have done much better.

The first version of a novel is always chaotic in the sense that the possibilities for the story are developed in a contradictory way. I write the same episodes two or three times from different points of view, from different perspectives. I sometimes develop

contradictory trajectories of the plots, without trying to solve these contradictions or even changing the names of the characters or the places in which the episodes and anecdotes take place. And so it is a kind of magma that is very painful for me to write. But I know that when this magma is completed I will stop writing chaotically because all the possibilities are there, that my insecurity will vanish, that writing will become an enjoyable and exciting experience. All this I discovered in my first novel fighting very hard against myself. It was when I had this draft, this magma, that I started to feel what it means to create. That is why I say that what I really enjoy is not so much writing as editing a novel. Other writers, of course, approach their work differently. For example, Julio Cortázar did not rewrite a great deal. I was amazed when I learned that he wrote only one version of *Hopscotch*. The first version was the definitive version. When Cortázar sat down each morning to write, he did not know what was going to happen in the novel. He wrote the whole book in this spontaneous way, something that is for me unthinkable.

Writing a book can be a painful experience, but there is also pleasure. I would say that you have great moments of pleasure, great excitement, but they are a definite exception to the daily experience of writing. Creation really begins for me when I have a first version of the novel, when I have to choose, to select, to eliminate everything that is not worthwhile for the development of the story. When I discover that within this magma there are some logical and coherent trajectories and some forces, or drives, in the characters that must be followed and used, I begin to feel that I am in a process of literary creation, of inventing something. I always write a second version, in which I concentrate totally on the structure of the novel. At that time I am not concerned about language very much, about the use of words and phrases. I am entirely absorbed in the organization of the story, in the creation of the time structure in the novel. I did not know it at the time I wrote *The Time of the Hero*, but I later discov-

ered that from a technical point of view there are two essential things to solve or create when writing a novel. The first is the invention of the narrator. I think the narrator is the most important character in a novel. In some cases this importance is obvious because the narrator is also a central figure, a central character in the novel. In other cases the narrator is not a character, not a visible figure, but an invisible person whose creation is even more complicated and difficult than the creation of one of the characters.

When I wrote *The Time of the Hero*, I was not aware of the role of the narrator, I was not conscious of it. Instinctively, I discovered that the creation of the narrator is extremely important because if you are not coherent in establishing the laws under which the narrator works, develops the action, approaches the action, or takes a distance from the action he is narrating, then the whole persuasive force of the novel will disappear. Therefore, coherence is what is important. You can give any kind of power to the narrator, but always within a coherent system. If the system is clear and coherent, the novel's power of persuasion will be achieved. If not, if there are incoherences and the narrator acts in an arbitrary way, this immediately translates into disbelief for the reader. The reader feels that something is wrong, that what he has been told is not really happening but has been imposed on him peremptorily. And so the narrator must be faithful to the laws that create the system of narration in a novel.

The second essential problem a novelist should solve is the organization of time. The narrator and time give fiction its sovereignty, its independence from the real world. A novel is never similar to the real world; a novel is always a separate world, a world that has something essentially different from real reality. It is a fictitious reality that is always in opposition to real reality. The difference between fictitious reality and real reality is the presence of this narrator, which in real reality does not exist, and of the time structure, which in fiction is never similar to that

of real life. Chronology, the organization of time, and the way in which time flows in fiction are different from real time; and the organization of time is one of the aspects in which you can trace the originality of a fictitious world. The way in which each novelist, each fiction writer, organizes the time structure is what gives his literary work its originality and, again, its sovereignty. I discovered the importance of a coherent system for the narrator and for the time structure in *The Time of the Hero*.

One important influence in the writing of this novel, as we have seen, was my experience at the military school; another was the French thinker and writer Jean Paul Sartre. I read Sartre with great enthusiasm and admiration when I was at the university. At that time existentialism in philosophy was influential throughout the world and certainly at the university I attended in Peru. Sartre was particularly important in my discovery of modern literature, and I began to discover the importance of form in fiction while reading his novels and short stories. But most important were Sartre's ideas about literature, about what a writer should be and what literature should be. His ideas about committed literature were extremely important to me.

At that time I became very political, very much concerned about social problems, and I joined the Communist party in Peru. Because Socialist realism was the official aesthetic philosophy of the Communist party, I had a difficult relationship with my comrades in the party because I could not share this philosophy, this aesthetic doctrine of Socialist realism, which espoused literature as propaganda, as a vehicle to disseminate political ideas and the correct philosophy of the proletariat. Although I read much on Marxism during this period, I had these differences because of Sartre (who always had a love/hate relationship with Marxism), because Sartre's ideas about literature and the relationship between literature and history were so convincing to me that I could never accept the official doctrine of the party. I was never an orthodox Marxist; I was, for a short period of time,

a very unorthodox Marxist. In *The Time of the Hero* you can feel something of the Marxist element, but I do not think it is evident in my later books.

I liked Sartre's idea that literature is not and cannot be gratuitous, that it is unacceptable for literature to be purely entertainment, that literature is serious because a writer, through his books, can be a voice in society, can change things in life. I knew by heart the presentation of *Le Temps Moderne*, a literary magazine Sartre published in France in the late forties, in which he said that words are acts that can produce social change, historical change, and that if a writer has this power he has the moral obligation to use it to fight for the victims of society, denouncing all the mystifications, all the wrongdoings of his time. I also liked Sartre's idea that literature is intimately linked with contemporary time, that it is morally unacceptable to use literature to escape from contemporary problems.

When I want to write about political matters, I write essays or articles or give lectures. I am convinced that creative literature is not a good vehicle for political statements. If you try to use literature as a vehicle for political propaganda, for the dissemination of political ideas, you fail as a writer. When I write literature, I concentrate on what is truly literature, something larger than politics. You can use politics for literature, but you cannot do the reverse. Literature should not be used to promote a political idea because the result will be damaging to literature. I have written novels in which politics plays an important role; for example, *Conversation in The Cathedral*. You can say it is a political novel because there are descriptions of a society subjected to a dictatorship and because political ideas and political actions are an important element of the work. But the novel was not written to disseminate political ideas. If what is compelling you to write is to make a political statement, you should not write a novel or use any other kind of fiction; for that it is much better to use a more rational genre, like the essay.

I believe the Sartrean ideas of social and moral responsibility in literature are profoundly reflected in what I tried to do in my first novel, which contains this kind of social concern. The military school, the life of the cadets, and their relationship with the military officers are a kind of pretext to describe the conflicts, the violent kinds of institutions a society like Peru has, as well as the economic and social injustices in that society. At the same time, Sartre's influence was present at other levels of the novel. In Sartre you not only had these ideas of the social thinker and social philosopher but you saw him as a writer, a writer of fiction and plays. In Sartre there was an unconscious fascination for the dark side of personality, for mischievous behavior, for torturous kinds of acts or inclinations or drives in human beings. It is interesting because Sartre is probably one of the most rational writers I have read, rational in the sense that he exercised strict control over his material. There is no feeling of spontaneity in Sartre's novels or plays. The impression you have as a reader of a Sartre book is that invention in his case was like a monstrous by-product of intelligence and reason, instead of the normally spontaneous creative drive that is at the core of most literature. In Sartre everything is rational, but in spite of that, there are always dark manifestations of irrationality in the characters of his novels or plays. His characters usually reflect the anguish of their lives. But through their behavior you can see the presence of something purely instinctive, something that cannot be really disciplined or controlled by reason.

I think that this attention to the darker aspects of human behavior also occurs in my first novel. The actions of some of the characters express the same kind of fascination for this torturous behavior, for this evil manifestation of personality. These characterizations probably come from my readings of Sartre's novels.

Another writer who also had an influence on the writing of *The Time of the Hero* was André Malraux, another French

writer. His novels are not widely read anymore, which is a pity because he was a great novelist. I read his novels with great enthusiasm. And probably for all the many episodes in *The Time of the Hero* that describe collective action and the life of the cadets as a community, I had in mind the episodes in Malraux's novels in which he describes the scene collectively. I think he was a great novelist of the collective aspects of life. In *La Condition humaine* and *L'Espoir*, particularly, Malraux was especially successful in describing collectivity, the way in which great numbers of people act, in public demonstrations, in a war.

William Faulkner is another writer who had an influence on the writing of *The Time of the Hero*. He has had an enormous influence on Latin American literature, and I discovered his work when I was finishing my university studies. I remember that Faulkner was the first writer I read with a paper and pen, trying to decipher the structures, the formal creation in his novels. By reading Faulkner I learned that form could be a character in a novel and sometimes the most important character—that is, the organization of the perspective of the narration, the use of different narrators, the withholding of some information from the reader to create ambiguity. I was fascinated with this extraordinary mastering of the structure of a fictional work. I suppose this is also visible in my first novel. The organization of the story reflects some kind of fascination with these formal possibilities of the narrative form, the discovery of which I owe to Faulkner.

The story of *The Time of the Hero* is told at different levels. There are some characters who are presented to the reader only from an external point of view. The reader sees and watches the characters move and say things but does not know what has happened in the characters' inner selves. The reader is not aware of the motivation for their actions. Teresa, an important character in the novel, is an example of the external point of view. Not until the end of the novel does the reader discover that she is just one character. Until then she appears to be three different

characters because she is depicted through the eyes of three different cadets who have known her at different moments and independently one of the other. And so they have a different image, a different idea of this girl; and only at the end do we realize that Teresa, who first is Esclavo's girl friend and then Alberto's, is the same little girl friend Jaguar had in his childhood and whom he later married.

On the other hand some characters are presented only from an internal point of view; and so while the reader knows what is behind their actions, behind their external conduct, this external conduct is itself closed to him. Then there are some characters, particularly the intellectual ones of the novel (there is a cadet who is interested in literature and another cadet who writes pornographic short stories), who are presented in both ways, simultaneously described from an external and an internal point of view. These different levels are not gratuitous; there was a reason for using a different perspective for each character.

For instance, the most contradictory personality in the book is a tough boy nicknamed by his fellow students "Jaguar." He has the public personality of a tough guy. He is the leader of a gang of four called "The Circle" and always acts as a tough and even brutal person in order to be respected. In a way, he incarnates the *machismo* philosophy that the officers and the school try to impose on the students. At the same time, he has a completely different secret personality, which he tries to hide because it would be a symptom of weakness—to reveal, for instance, sensitivity or emotions. So he presents himself only from an external point of view, only as he wants to be seen by the others. At the end of the novel, the reader will discover this other aspect of his personality and this one-sided character will become a more ambiguous and complex human being.

Another character, the most primitive in the novel, a cadet nicknamed "Boa," is a pervert who practices bestiality with a dog in school. He is described only from an internal point of

view in a kind of stream-of-consciousness narration. This level represents the most instinctive aspect of life in the school. My experience at Leoncio Prado was that the whole philosophical and moral system that created the school's atmosphere had the capacity to give this instinctive aspect of personality an essential role in life. What I wanted to do through this character Boa was to show how the behavior of these boys could be seen as representing a distortion of this military philosophy. I wanted to show this only as a personal and intimate mechanism.

There are many sets of oppositions in *The Time of the Hero*. One is the world of the students and the world of the officers—childhood and adulthood. These two worlds are extremely different, even if they share the same philosophy, the same moral values, and the same social values. The officers do not know what real life is for the cadets, and vice versa. The cadets reproduce the lives of the officers in their own daily lives, in their secret lives. They reproduce the rituals, the way in which the officers treat each other; they reproduce not only the language but also the customs and the prejudices. But this is not a literal reproduction. When the cadets try to imitate the officers' behavior, those rituals become distorted, transformed into something different, into a kind of caricature. This opposition is carefully developed in *The Time of the Hero*. I suppose this was the most Sartrean aspect of the book. It was a critical attempt to show how the philosophy of this military world could destroy or orient the personality of boys in such a distorted way; how the idea of courage, for instance, perceived by a boy of thirteen or fourteen, could become a very brutal way of approaching human relationships and feelings. This distortion by the students of what the adults of the novel are represents the most Sartrean element of the work.

At the same time the different personalities the students have are very important in the novel. They are different when they are among themselves from what they are when among adults. They are different when they are with the officers and when they



are with their families. And they are different when they are in school and when they are outside. It was as if the school created in them an aptitude for changing personality as a means of defending themselves against risks. That is why I used a phrase from one of Sartre's plays as an epigraph for the novel. "One acts the hero because one is a coward and a saint because one is evil; one acts the murderer because one longs to kill his fellow-being. One acts because one is a born liar."<sup>2</sup>

What I wanted to express in this transformation of personalities in the novel was the necessity for the boys to become different as a measure of defense in life. That is something they learned in school. When I was finishing the last version of the novel, the third version, in the last episode I wanted the reader to know about two of the characters many years after they had finished the military academy. There is a conversation between this tough guy Jaguar and a friend who is a hoodlum, a man from the underworld (Jaguar had also been linked with the underworld as a boy). Jaguar meets this friend, Higuera, one day, and they have coffee together while reminiscing about the past. Jaguar tells his friend about his wife. He married a girl whom he had loved since childhood. When rewriting this episode for the third time, I suddenly had this idea: Instead of having Jaguar telling us how he ran into the girl he still loved, why not present this girl directly in the conversation between Higuera and Jaguar, without any kind of announcement to the reader, as in a film? When you are watching one episode in a film, and suddenly another episode remembered by the character appears, it creates no confusion for the moviegoer. Why not do the same thing in the novel and mix the conversation between Jaguar and Higuera with another conversation, another episode that took place years ago, something that is being recalled by one of the characters?

2. *Kean*, which Sartre "based on the play by Alexandre Dumas," *Kean ou Désordre et Génie*.

That is what I did. It took a great deal of work and headaches to do it in a way that could be easily accepted by the reader. This technique became very important for the subsequent books I wrote. I discovered this way of mixing several episodes that took place in different times and different spaces into one sole episode, an extraordinary possibility, a possibility I would explore and develop much more in my later books. That is the reason I mention this episode. I became so thrilled with the possibility of mixing times and spaces within one episode that my second novel, *The Green House*, is totally constructed around this idea of the *vasos comunicantes*.