

# Leila Guerriero's artist profiles: the plots in the possible versions of a life

## *Los perfiles de artistas de Leila Guerriero: las tramas en las versiones posibles de una vida*



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### Abstract:

The purpose of this article is to explore the artist profiling by Argentine author Leila Guerriero, an outstanding member of the Latin American movement that calls itself the New Chroniclers of the Indies. In these texts, Guerriero captures these Hispanic American creators' voice, contradictions, and obsessions through her personal gaze, in which the author's subjectivity emerges. Perspective is a key piece in Guerriero's narrative dexterity, one that allows her to produce these biographical discourses. Using a hermeneutical approach, in her interaction with her interviewees, as well as in her interpretation of their accounts and actions, the chronicler seeks –and finds– “plots,” in Paul Ricoeur's terms. With them, and resorting to tools from a wide array of genres, she designs these profiles, or possible versions of a life, that often challenge the official ones.

### Keywords:

Leila Guerriero; chronicles; narrative journalism; profiling; non-fiction.

### Resumen:

El objetivo de este artículo es explorar los perfiles de artistas creados por la narradora argentina Leila Guerriero, una exponente de los auto-denominados Nuevos Cronistas de Indias de América Latina. En estas piezas plasma Guerriero la voz, las contradicciones y las obsesiones de estos realizadores hispanoamericanos a través de su mirada donde se advierte la subjetividad de la cronista. Esta perspectiva es una pieza clave de la destreza narrativa de la Guerriero, a través de la cual crea estos discursos biográficos. La cronista busca y encuentra, en la interacción con sus entrevistados, y en la interpretación de sus relatos y de sus actos, a través de una aproximación hermenéutica, “tramas,” en términos de Paul Ricoeur. Con ellas diseña estos perfiles o estas versiones posibles de una vida, que, en muchos casos cuestiona las versiones oficiales, y lo hace acudiendo a elementos de diversos géneros para cincelar una expresión original.

### Palabras clave:

Leila Guerriero; crónica; periodismo narrativo; perfil; no ficción.

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## 1. Introduction

In Hispanic America, the chronicle as a genre is in the foreground of the literary scene. A favorable context should be noted. First, the transnational grouping of chroniclers, self-designated New Chroniclers of the Indies at the 2012 meeting sponsored by the Mexican Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes (Conaculta) and the Fundación Gabo [formerly Fundación Nuevo Periodismo Iberoamericano], an institution designed and fostered by Gabriel García Márquez (Ramírez, 2012). The group includes authors like Leila Guerriero, Juan Villoro, Alma Guillermoprieto, Alberto Salcedo Ramos, Josefina Licita and Martín Caparrós, among others. Secondly, there is the wide industry that the genre has built to empower itself: institutions, awards, and journals –many of which are digital and usually for free, and thus can reach a large audience (Guerriero, 2016, p. 12). Thirdly, we should mention the chroniclers' didactic and transnational spirit, which has led them to plant in their students the seeds of new ways of seeing, and to offer tools for understanding complex realities in countries that are still striving to consolidate their democracies or to denounce abuses of power.

The Latin American chronicle is an expanding universe of non-fiction texts built with literary tools that includes, among others, Guerriero's profiles. This vernacular art has undergone different epochs over the centuries and has been influenced or conditioned by various political contexts, such as the Spanish Inquisition's prohibition to publish fiction, as pointed by Mario Vargas Llosa in "Novela primitiva y de creación en América Latina," which has catalyzed voices and pens like Ricardo Palma's (1991, p. 29). This form of expression came before the so-called American New Journalism; there are also significant differences in both movement's circumstances of production, as mentioned by Pablo Calvi (2010). Rodolfo Walsh, who gave the genre a twist of the screw and is widely thought to have revitalized it in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, published *Operación Masacre* in 1957, before Tom Wolfe's anthology *New Journalism* (1973). Walsh has been an inspiration for chroniclers such as Guerriero, who wrote "Rodolfo Walsh, o cómo no ser el hombre cualquiera" (2008), and the foreword to the 2018 edition of that fictionless novel (Asteroide, 2018).

It was Juan Villoro who gave the most extensive definition, and the one most cited by his peers, of the chronicle, a metonymy for a wider universe encompassing the concepts of narrative journalism, non-fiction, and even "fictionless novel," as Jorge Carrión calls the genre in his foreword to Martín Caparrós' *El Interior* (2014, p.7). The consensus among those who study, read and use in their texts these expressive devices leans toward the "platypus of prose," ("el ornitorrinco de la prosa" a metaphor that also accounts for its poetic approximation to recounting true, non-fiction facts:

If Alfonso Reyes thought that the essay was the centaur of genres, then the chronicle calls for a more complex symbol: the platypus of prose. It takes from the novel its subjective nature, the ability to narrate from the characters' world and to create an illusion of life to set the reader in the eye of the action; it takes its rigor around facts from the reportage; from the story, it takes the short-form dramatic sense and the suggestion that reality unfolds to tell a deliberate tale, with a self-justifying ending; it takes the dialogues from the interview, and the way of staging them, from modern drama; it takes the polyphony of witnesses from Greco-Latin drama, the lines understood as a debate: the "voice of the proscenium," as Wolfe calls it, the narrative version of public opinion, whose antecedent is the Greek chorus; from the essay, the possibility to set forth arguments and to connect disperse knowledge; from autobiography, the memorious tone, and the re-elaboration in the first person. The catalogue of influences can go on and on, competing with infinity. Used in excess, any of these devices may be lethal. The chronicle is an animal whose biological balance hinges on not being like the seven different animals it could be (Jaramillo Agudelo, 2012).

Leila Guerriero (Junín, 1967) also reflects about the genre in *Zona de obras* (2016), a hybrid journal –as hybrid as the chronicle itself– containing essays, lectures, papers, etc. And *Frutos extraños* (2006), the first collection of her chronicles and profiles published in an array of Latin American media, further features her aesthetic and journalistic ideas. Guerriero is one of the most outstanding figures of the genre, not only as an author but also as an editor of the prominent journal of narrative journalism *Gatopardo*. She has portrayed the activity of the Argentine Team of Forensic Anthropology (a text that earned her the Fundación Gabo's award) and she has immersed herself in Las Heras, a remote town in the Patagonia, to try and understand the motives behind a mysterious outbreak of juvenile suicides in *Los suicidas del fin del mundo* (2006). In *Una historia sencilla* (2013), she dives in a 21st century gaucho *malambo* contest carried out in the province of Córdoba. Her oeuvre also includes two essential anthologies for understanding the role of the chronicle in the Latin American scene in this century: *Mejor que ficción* (Anagrama, 2012), published by Jorge Carrión, and *Antología de crónica latinoamericana actual*, published by Darío Jaramillo Agudelo (Alfaguara, 2012). Her latest book, *Opus Gelber. Retrato de un pianista* (Anagrama, 2019), is her most extensive profile so far, about the life of Argentine concert pianist Bruno Gelber.

## 2. Methodology

In this article, we explore the artist profiles crafted by Guerriero, true literary pieces that go beyond any journalistic account relating to an immediate, newsworthy context such as a forthcoming book, the granting of an award, the opening of an exhibition, etc. Guerriero's profiles allow the reader to take a closer look at these lives and oeuvres thanks to the plots she constructs, whose value exceeds the literary, as pointed by Paul Ricoeur:

Is it not true that we find human lives to be more readable when they are interpreted based on the stories people tell about them? And is it not so that those life stories, in turn, become more intelligible as narrative models –that is to say, plots– taken from the stories themselves or from fiction (a drama or a novel) are applied to them? (1996)

Ricoeur's "Life: A Story in Search of a Narrator", *Time and Narrative II*, and *Self as Other* work here as a theoretical framework to understand the complexity of Guerriero's narrative and her hermeneutical approximation to these various artists' lives and works. Through the prism of her gaze, her subjectivity, and her interpretation, in her profiles, she constructs possible plots for human lives. Here, we will first inquire about Guerrero's perspective in her profiles, and second, we will take Juan Villoro's definition of the chronicle to point at the use of multiple narrative resources, such as becoming a character herself –a secondary one, but a character nonetheless; as well as the borrowing from different genres, such as small scenes and dialogues from drama, a novel or story-like creation of different settings and atmospheres, the idea of an ending and, to go back to this work's central concept, a plot.

Guerriero has profiled not just artists but a diverse set of people, and most of these pieces have been featured in the media. The corpus for this article includes the anthology *Plano americano*, *Opus Gelber*, and a profile of María Kodama published in 2020 in the newspaper *El País*.

### 3. The shot and the gaze: In search of a plot

In her profiles, Guerriero proposes intimate, often irreverent texts, with a perspective that diverges from traditional journalism: "Be invisible: listen to what people have to say. And don't interrupt. Sitting in front of a cup of tea or a glass of water, feel the choked uneasiness of silence. And have respect," she writes in "Arbitraria," a manifesto of sorts that introduces *Zona de obras* (2016, p. 14). One of the clearest and most recent examples is from "Apuntes sobre María Kodama," published in the Spanish newspaper *El País*. Jorge Luis Borges' widow presents her story book; this means she is open to interviews as promotion, but Guerriero schedules subsequent meetings with her. The chronicler wants to create a profile, take off the mask that many public figures wear when facing the press. Guerriero portrays a narcissistic woman who seems to know more than she reveals about Borges' work, for whom she acts as executor, and who fiercely guards her own intimacy and whatever is said of her, as if she wished to create a character and a myth, and to control the voice captured in her profile. The chronicler notices the intent:

Her replies always take the form of anecdotes that repeat themselves identically, including the comments and jokes she inserts. Since these anecdotes have the appearance of being a big confession, they tend to work as a spell that bars any follow-up questions, and thus as a great evasion maneuver (2020).

Guerriero does not merely write or reproduce that which her interviewee pours onto the recorder. More than the *what*, the chronicler provides the *how*, that is, the nuance in these meetings, the silences, and uneasiness, and the elusive maneuvers that are characteristic of oral discourse. She also writes about her encounters with Borges' widow:

She uses a kind tone –even if, after a misunderstanding, she exclaims, "But I'm telling you Borges had already died! You're either not listening or not hearing well. Is this thing recording properly?"–, but all attempts to go back to certain topics are in vain (2020).

Through small details she notices –she never visits Kodama at her home again, as she does (even over and over) with other interviewees–, Guerriero creates an original profile of the writer in the course of several encounters (the author includes a somewhat hostile phone call where Kodama scolds her for the from the text will have after several meetings). Guerriero could have reproduced Kodama's statements, her dressing style, a few stories (the great majority of which Kodama had already related in other interviews) and her memories. Yet what she does is to trace a psychological profile or, at least, depict clear personality traits of a person apt to assert, "People love me so much" (2020), even if she does not specify who those people are, even if she is still exasperated by the memories of events that took place a quarter century ago, even if she claims she hates no one, but the reader may interpret otherwise. The title of the interview, "Apuntes sobre María Kodama," ("Notes on María Kodama") makes it clear that what the reader can find in the text are mere notes, an unfinished work, not by the chronicler but by Kodama, the one placing the obstacles along the way. It should be noted that, unlike some of the flagship Latin American non-fiction, such as *Relato de un naufragio*, where Gabriel García Márquez reproduces the voice of sailor Luis Alejandro Velasco, here the chronicler questions the voices she hears. She does not merely reproduce them, and she moves away from the official version or the one offered by the figure being profiled.

In the three volumes of *Time and Narrative*, Ricoeur sets forth his theory of the way historical narrative is created, going from the particular to the general, from the individual to the collective. His starting point is the notion that "the *I* in *self*-knowledge is the result of a life examined, a life recounted and resumed by that reflection as it applies to works, to texts, to culture" (1995, p.

28). In this regard, a high-quality profile, one that is inquiring, deep, and subjectively investigative –as in the case of Guerriero– involuntarily supports a wider-reaching project.

Chroniclers do not try to hide their own presence in the story, their own footsteps, even their own gaze. Quite the contrary: the latter is a constituent part of the genre and form of expression. “A chronicle is, first and foremost, a way of looking that finds a narrative style. Once this voice is found that can reproduce a particular way of looking, then possibilities, devices, and resources are explored,” says María Angulo Egea (2013, p. 14). It is through this way of looking that the author displays their subjectivity. Guerriero reflects on this during an interview with newspaper *La Nación* (2015):

Objectivity doesn’t exist. When you gaze at a piece of reality, you do so with all of your cultural, political, social backgrounds, with your sorrows, with your marital issues even. Expecting a journalist to be completely neutral and to tell something as if it was *the* truth and nothing but the truth seems absurd to me, although that doesn’t mean it’s necessarily dishonest.

Not only has objectivity ceased to be a goal, but it has also become an entelechy of the past. Guerriero explains this over and over as an interviewee: “Objective journalism is the greatest lie in the universe. Everything’s subjective” (2015). The chronicler defends this narrative and gnoseological approach as a narrating subject that trims reality with her particular perspective. *Plano americano*, her anthology of profiles of Hispanic American artists, accounts for this focus (a journalism term, also known as ‘approach,’ referring to a certain argumentative or thematic coherence). In *Lacrónica*, Caparrós describes the genre with the formula, ‘perspective plus writing’ (2015, p. 65).

“Fiction and history belong to one same class, as regards narrative structure,” says Ricoeur (2006, p. 269). These non-fiction profiles, run through by human plots, are an example of the philosopher’s claim. Of course, Guerriero’s goal is not historical, but it is documental in that no elements of fiction intervene, and there is a meticulous reconstruction of the episodes the protagonists do not know about or remember well, and a rigorous verification of the data. The author’s perspective weaves the plot, assembles the narration, searches for coherence and meaning.

What is that perspective like? As she considers perspective in the chronicle, Patricia Poblete Alday explains that literary style, with its many devices, is the consequence of perspective.

It should be noted that this aesthetic aspect is a consequence of the previous point –perspective– and is not in itself a constituent of the “narrative” or “literary” nature of this kind of text. In other words: a chronicle is not “literary” because its author relies on metaphors, plays with time in the story, or displays a command of language that goes beyond the referential; its aesthetic breadth derives from a certain focus of the reality it seeks to frame, rather than of the text, and that focus is usually governed by an ethical criterion (2020, p. 136).

Guerriero’s profiles keep a curious, questioning attitude toward each interviewee –not ridiculing or biting, but not complacent either. Every time an answer seems lacking in coherence, the chronicle goes deeper. This hermeneutical procedure, this *will* is explicit in certain profiles. The author finds and constructs biographical plots; these texts are much more than an enumeration of hallmarks in a person’s –an artist’s, in this case– life. Photographer Sara Facio blurts, “I don’t know what we’re going to talk about. I’m not interesting” (2013, p. 93).

"Stories are narrated –life is lived. Thus, a chasm seems to open up between fiction and life," says Ricoeur (2006, p. 15), and the title of the French philosopher's essay– "Life: A Story in Search of a Narrator" –becomes descriptive of the chronicler's goal. It is the construction of a plot that turns these profiles into narrations. The plot, which the philosopher defines, with an Aristotelian approach, as a "synthesis of the heterogeneous," must be intelligible: "[...] any well-narrated story teaches something; more precisely, [Aristotle] said that a story reveals universal aspects of the human condition" (2006, p. 10). Guerriero creates these patters, not *ex nihilo*, as might be the case with fiction, but using verifiable data, such as by reviewing various sources, in *intelligible* accounts.

Ricoeur's hermeneutical approach can be spotted in Guerriero's profiles. The chronicler seeks not only to narrate, to portray, but also to understand. In terms of Hans-Robert Hauss, she practices "the dialogical nature of understanding" (Piché, 1989, p. 2), thus her emphasis on puns, on the singularities of the exchange between her and her interlocutors, as mentioned regarding Kodama's profile. She also finds obstacles in the narration and the search for a plot when she works with Nicanor Parra:

Reaching the house on Lincoln Street, on the coastal town of Las Cruces, 200 kilometers from Santiago de Chile, where Nicanor Parra lives, is easy. What's hard is reaching him (2013).

Something similar happens with Fogwill, who opens the door for her to his chaotic apartment, but, as she finds later, is reluctant to give her access to *himself*. The chronicler interviews a friend of his: "The writer has been a friend of Fogwill's for a long time. Yet he knows nothing about him" (2013, p. 39). In this case, the difficulty is not given by any evasive strategies, but by the sheer complexity of the subject, the chaos in which he used to live and which Guerriero portrays in this, paraphrasing Ricoeur, "synthesis of the heterogeneous." By giving it a plot, she also puts a life in order, makes it intelligible. "Now I'd like you to tell me what you're going to do with all this," Felisa Pinto asks her (2013, p. 131).

Guerriero does not flatter her interviewees, and sometimes the reader can tell or sense what certain replies stir in her. "What is this man made of?" is what Guerriero admits to wondering (2019, para. 4), in later interviews, and what prompted her to write her longest profile of an artist so far: *Opus Gelber*, about Argentine pianist Bruno Gelber. Her subjectivity –the liking and curiosity she develops for this eccentric while disciplined man– reveals itself in Guerriero's singular perspective as she highlights the kitsch and the ambiguous in the way he constructs the account of his own life and career, as well as the glory of a man that has traveled the world in luxury, rubs shoulders with the European nobility, and lives in a popular neighborhood in Buenos Aires. Over the course of a year, Guerriero interviewed, conversed, shared dinners and teas and everyday moments with this illustrious musician. She often performed a truly immersive exercise and practice in the public artist's private and domestic life. Unlike inscrutable Kodama, Gelber introduces the chronicler to his acquaintances, opens the door to his apartment for her, includes her in his closest circle. Here, she is not a mere witness of a time or an event; she builds a relationship with her subject.

There is no record of our first introduction, the greetings we exchanged, the casual comments before the questions in the first interview. One thing is sure, however: it was all much more formal than it was to become. The ferocious humor, the unruly replies, the labyrinthine return to unsettling issues: all of that came later, with the passing weeks and months (2019).

The chronicler's gaze, in a different scale, also wants to go beyond or, rather, further into the person: gain access to them, get to know their way of relating to others, of making sense of their past, their obsessions, their quests and aches. The idea is not to make

it into their habitat, much less to get sensational, but to gain access to their horizon, in hermeneutical terms (Piché, 1989, 4). To do that, she needs to be invisible. “Leila Guerriero never interferes, never uses her subjects for self-promotion; she practices the invisibility Flaubert demanded from true creators (who, like God, «must be everywhere but visible nowhere»),” writes Mario Vargas Llosa in a review of *Plano americano* (2003, para. 5) in *El País*.

Not only does Gelber allow Guerriero access to his home/temple; he also introduces her to his sister and his close collaborators. “There was nothing I wasn’t allowed to ask. He’s a good reader of his interlocutors. He trusted me. If he lets you go into this or that part of the house, or contact his family, it’s because he allows this gaze,” claims the chronicler (2019, para. 6). Guerriero tries to reach the genius’ core. She seeks to be invisible, melt herself into his everyday life, and succeeds, as Gelber lives in a stage-apartment where he is always the star, where he is admired (etymologically, *regarded* with wonder) by his guests. Guerriero finds a plot. And what a monumental challenge it is for an interviewer to be invisible, to go unnoticed as they burst into a person’s everyday life, a stranger about to portray their subject. Interpreting, for this chronicler, means making sense not only of what her interviewee says, but also of the plot they weave: what kind of character they want to construct for themselves, which are the narrative climaxes, and even, in the words of Algirdas Julius Greimas, who are the actants in the story.

Guerriero borrows tools from journalism, covers to avoid asserting untruths. She adds voices/sources to reconstruct the life and experience of a given character. In “Quién le teme a Aurora Venturini,” for example, rather than being content with interviewing the author of *Las primas*, she also talks to her nephew and María Laura Fernández Berro, who was Venturini’s secretary for many years. Guerriero unearths the contradictions that are inherent in the indulgent account a person makes of their own life, but is particularly careful to mistrust the testimonial account of those who are experts precisely in this art. In *Family Romances* (1909), Sigmund Freud writes about the way people construct their own account of their childhoods and parents (based on social categories and their differences, for instance). This psychological mechanism does not mean that they lie or depart from the truth but, rather, that this is their way of making sense of their ties and roles within their family. Freud explains that the neurotic “regrets having to share [love and attention] with the other children in the family” (Dorado, 2017, p. 83).

—I believe there never was a brother —says María Laura Fernández Berro—. She said in many interviews that her mother put her in charge of the boy, that she had to take care of him until he died, but her sister Ofelia says, “We never had a brother like that. Why does she do that?” She’s outraged (2013).

During her meetings with her subjects, Guerriero prompts them to examine their lives. She does not want to comment or to narrate isolated facts; these profiles integrate an array of times in a person’s life, an array of facets, of an artist in this case, that are then narrated through Guerriero’s perspective.

And every time he says, Dad, let’s watch *Kung Fu Panda*, I want cheese and jam, Kohan feels there are times when it’s possible: that over there, right under the surface, are the lysergic waters of his own childhood and that, from time to time, and thanks to Agustín, he can still drink from them. Maybe not quench his thirst, but drink some anyway (2013).

In *Opus Gelber*, Guerriero highlights the musician’s talent but without turning into a complacent narrator, one that avoids an uncomfortable question. Neither his sexuality nor his passions or the complicated relationship with his sister are left out. Or his hairpiece.

He wants me to see this.

He wants me to see all of it.

He wants me to see all of it (2019, p. 163).

She repeats the verb *to see*, but her gaze is never that of an informer. What interests her, the goal her gaze is at the service of, is not to describe what is in front of her, the material, the tangible, but to interpret that which she perceives with her senses, as well as the place it holds: a gesture, a memory, an inflection, a domestic behavior, and even, as with Gelber, that which her interviewee exhibits deliberately and theatrically to her, whether as a challenge or simply for her to include it in her profile.

"My relationship, even with the people I interview, is one that allows for great sensitivity, but also one that has very clear limits," she says during an interview by Spanish writer and editor Juan Cruz Ruiz in *Literatura que cuenta* (2017, p. 26). This does not mean that she abandons her journalistic style, her follow-up questions, her originality that allows her to go above and beyond the pile of previous interviews she has read and reviewed about a particular subject.

In most profiles, the majority of the interviewees' replies are on the shorter side, which does not preclude the reader from noticing their tone, inflections and reactions to certain questions from the chronicler. Perhaps it is in "Nada es lo que parece," Ricardo Piglia's profile, published in 2010, where the voice of the subject is heard the loudest. An air of farewell (to the life and work of an intellectual) goes in circles through the text about this writer, teacher, and born lecturer, a friendly man who offers grapes to the chronicler.

"A plot is a not very scientific at all, very human mix of material causes, ends, and causalities," writes Ricoeur (2006, p. 283). In this regard, and with still ongoing, art-producing lives, with various accessibility issues to her interviewees that go beyond the mere refusal or evasion and include the subjects' difficulty to narrate their own lives, Guerriero composes possible lives, versions of a life, that carry the mark of her gaze.

#### 4. The elements of the platypus

What are the elements of fiction used by Guerriero in the construction of her profiles? We mentioned earlier that Ricoeur finds in the plots of narrative identities elements from "drama or the novel" (1996, p. 107). This is why, in this article, we use Villoro's definition of the chronicle (in some contexts considered synonymous with literary or narrative journalism), linked in its hybrid nature and its diverse composition, as well as in its search for non-fiction, to the French philosopher's proposal when it comes to understanding how history is constructed and who its narrators are.

The chronicle, as Juan Villoro points out, has elements from the reportage: so-called "hard" information –the statistic, concrete, verifiable data from reliable sources– appears always in the text. These data filters organically into the text, in the dialogues, through a third-person narrator, from a given source, etc. Because of the rigor and documentation of this particular journalist –and teacher–, her study of a body of work and its context of production, and the multiplicity of sources she consults to eradicate both ambiguity and a univocal perspective, her profiles approach the academic genre. There is also an original position or perspective, a thesis that, like a backbone, supports these profiles with a question or focus. Part of the critic will even consider these profiles historical documents, like the one mentioned earlier on Parra, who was reluctant to give interviews and was yielded



from the intellectual circles and the media. Marcela Alejandra Aguilar Guzmán analyzes the concept of the extravagant in several Latin American chroniclers, and establishes a relationship between it and the hermit, another motif in these texts. The researcher underscores the interest in these characters in Leila Guerriero's artist profiles, as in the one on Parra.

Another element listed by Villoro in his definition of the “platypus of prose” is the drama, because of its dynamic dialogues. The following excerpt seems taken from a scene in a play:

The restaurant is a homely place. The menu offers empanadas and seafood, and he studies it without using the magnifying glass in his pocket (he doesn't wear glasses).

—I'll have a shrimp empanada, he says to the waitress.

—The order is two.

Parra pauses.

—Nothing, then.

—Nothing?

Another pause.

—Fine, you're right. Two empanadas. That'll be it. I'm upset now (2013).

In an essential volume on the genre, *La invención de la crónica*, Susana Rotker points at referentiality as a distinctive element of chronicle, together with the use of the first person. Guerriero avoids assuming the place of a character, eschews autobiography, but her voice is clear, although in a professional rather than an intimist way: as a narrating narrator, one who faces multiple challenges in her research (in her experience) and in her writing. In the following passage from *Opus Gelber*, the reader can spot the relationship between the chronicler and the artist:

«Don't be so intellectual! And call me to tell me how it went.»

When I comply, I tell myself that I do so out of politeness (2019).

Being invisible does not make a chronicler, at least in Guerriero's case, a “beige narrator” or an “aseptic” one, in Tom Wolfe's terms from *New Journalism* (2006, p. 30). Juan José Millás highlights the narrator's discretion and refers to her as a character in its own right within the non-fiction narration.

If you approach the book listening for what the narrating voice (which coincides with the author's) says of itself, rather than heeding for the narrated events, you'll notice that, despite the discretion of her presence, the writer's personality imbues the book's atmosphere from beginning to end. She, Guerriero, is the secret protagonist, the hidden character tapping on the reader's mind, of which one would like to know more than she reveals. The construction of this veiled character is a first-class narrative feat (2019).

Guerriero's chronicles also have elements from the novel, like the composition of an atmosphere before a given event, such as when she is about to meet her subject for the first time or for certain fragments of their memories. The narration is almost never chronological; analepses link to the subject's personality (traumas, training, sorrows, opportunities, etc.) in retrospect. For example, this is how “Felisa Pinto: Retrato de una dama” (2013, p. 109) begins:

Tender is the night.

The apartment on Libertad St. and Marcelo T. de Alvear overlooks a park where trees resemble fresh blossoms. The hostess, Fanny Llambi Campbell de Ferreyra (AKA Bebita), has just come back from a boat trip and is throwing a party on this apartment that is not hers, because she looks down on the idea of owning a home and lives in Paris, New York, and Buenos Aires. It's the summer of 1952, perhaps 1953. The picture window is a limpid panel through which the clear night pours in. There's a breeze, and the slow hum of the city filters into the apartment, where classy creatures laugh, smoke, drink.

The woman comes into frame from the right. She walks as if she's part of the earth, with an epic, serene grace. She's wearing a navy-blue shirt and an optical white poplin shirt. Her face has the beauty of that which can't be copied. The lines, undulating softly around the cheekbones, become the proud architecture of the eyebrows, the vivacity of the mouth, the charcoal of the eyes. As her figure traverses the space before the picture window with absent-minded grace, something in the inner workings of the party is stopped in its tracks. Because the woman who's just torn the tenderness of the night pours over those present at once the euphoria and the sadness of feeling that what they are living is already a memory.

Juan José Millás refers to or rehearses a classification of *Opus Gelber*: "We read it as a long chronicle (maybe as a biography) because that is how it is sold to us, but we'd read it as a novel if it was marketed under that label" (2019). The Spanish author is not talking about the work's length, but about the density and depth with which Guerriero constructs her character.

There are also elements from the story in Guerriero's profiles: a sense of completeness, of coherence, an "air of settlement," a term Guerriero takes from Juan Villoro (Cruz Ruiz, 2017, p. 37). Even in her interviews or profiles where she does not tell a defined story with a time progression, she provides an ending, as if it were a story, such as in visual artist Guillermo Kuitca's profile, "El artista del mundo inmóvil" (2013, p. 92).

To let time go by. Then to laugh. Then to pay. And then to go.  
And to see him go, too, under the rain.  
A homeless man, desperately trying to get back someplace.

The essay is also characteristic of chronicles, another element of the "platypus of prose." Perhaps it is in Carlos Monsiváis' prose where this is most evident. Guerriero seeks to ponder rather than to assert. In her profiling of artists, where there is a trace of the essay –and she comes closer to cultural criticism–, she refers to a particular, aesthetic or poetic body of work. About Lucrecia Martel's filmography, for instance, she writes: "In Lucrecia Martel's films, death and the fall are things that happen out of frame. Things that are terrifying precisely because they are unseen" (2013, p. 185). In these texts, she also explores an oeuvre and its context through her original perspective, and there is a contrast with academic sources. Yet there is also a possibility not always available to researchers: probing the artists and intellectuals she describes. It is true that Guerriero does not propose a thesis but a gaze, still she supports it with arguments as well as observations.

At this point, we must go back to Ricoeur, who underlines how the fictional novel has explored, through various devices, plots whose goal was to better and deeper understand human existence: "How many conventions, how many artifices are needed to write life, to compose through writing its understanding drill? (2004, p. 392). The philosopher pointed at this paradox, whereby an

author resorts to fiction to address “life,” understood as non-fiction. Therefore, the profile, by virtue of its non-fiction nature and its use of narrative, novel-like elements, could perhaps dismantle this paradox.

Let us explore next Guerriero’s style. Mario Vargas Llosa has referred to this distinctive, expressive component of Guerriero’s writing in a column in the Spanish newspaper *El País*, where he highlights that her prose combines precision and originality:

Each of these profiles or portraits of musicians, authors, photographers, filmmakers, painters, singers, is a precious object, crafted and written with the persuasion, the originality and the elegance of an accomplished story or poem. In our world, journalism is often the realm of spontaneity and imprecision, but the kind Leila Guerriero practices is that of the best copywriters from *The New Yorker*, to establish a comparable level of excellence: it entails rigorous work, exhaustive research, and a mathematically precise style (2013).

As stated by the Peruvian author, Guerriero’s profiles combine rigor and style (2013). Angulo Egea points out the chronicler’s profile of Homero Alsina Thevenet, where this combination can be spotted:

The beginning of this profile is symptomatic of what’s understood by narrative journalism. We’re provided with the necessary information to be able to place the character (Uruguayan, journalist, film critic), of course, but we’re presented with the subject in action, in a scene, in a fundamental turning point of his life: he’s dying, and he tells us about it in the first person (2013).

Juan Cruz Ruiz places Guerriero first among the interviews published in *Literatura que cuenta*, not listed in alphabetical order. Cruz studies long interviews to explore the rhetoric and craft of the main figures in the field of narrative journalism, and he describes Guerriero as “wild” because she seems “a child unaccustomed to being the one replying to someone else’s questions” (2017, p. 11). Cruz is probably alluding to this reaction or behavior over the course of this interview, even if succeeds in having a long conversation with the author where, as she does with her own interviewees, he gets to dive into her childhood, during the military regime.

I grew up during the dictatorship. The dictatorship started in 1976, and I was born in 1967, so I was very little then. I’m not sure whether these are false memories or true memories that emerge over time, but I remember the radio very clearly –because we didn’t have a TV set at home– when the Army gave the statement. I don’t know what they said, but I remember that, it stood with me for some reason. There must have been a sense of danger, of the sinister –I’m not sure. But I was terrified to hear it.

Memories are not always trustworthy or faithful, and Guerriero is well aware of it. She relies on them, not just to give her reply, but also to construct the plot in the profiles, as they leave their traces in people’s psyches.

Juan Cruz Ruiz asked Guerriero what her style is like, how she would describe it. “Style is like yogurt: it goes bad after a certain number of years,” she answered (2017, p. 35). One of the few pieces of criticism targeted at Villoro’s definition of the chronicle was that it did not include poetry. One of the trademarks of prose, not only in Guerriero’s profiles, is precisely its poetry, the verses (by other authors, by the authors she portrays, and her own) that not only make the prose more musical, but also give rhythm to texts that might be read as academic (given their strong documental value), despite the lack of footnotes or a bibliographical section at the end.

Guerriero’s profiles are polyphonic texts, mosaics that collect the voices of the artists, but also of those who know them best, their private sides, their most authentic. Vargas Llosa says about Guerriero’s approach:

[She constructs a] polyhedric perspective of these people, the effect of which is creating a sense of totality, of a synthesis that grips everything of substance there is or was in them. The result is always positive –eventually, all her subjects elicit the reader's liking, sometimes their admiration or their tenderness, and almost always their solidarity (2013).

Within the universe of these artist profiles, there is a subset that differs from the approximation to or encounter with her subjects through dialogue, when she portrays figures who have already passed, like Roberto Arlt, Idea Vilariño or Pedro Henríquez Ureña. In these cases, her documentation is as rigorous as when the author can interview them, but the testimonies of the sources who have met the artists are perhaps given a more prominent place. There is also the perspective of literary criticism, in the case of the first two artists. For instance, for the Uruguayan poet's profile, Guerriero resorts (at least) to eight people who met Vilariño: her brother, her friends, her ex-husband. She also reconstructs her work and her life by means of all the interviews Vilariño gave, again, in a documental effort whose explicitness is a way of arguing that, from this subjective entry point, she pursues the most faithful portrayal possible of a psyche and a poetics.

She was discreet, and she insisted that she'd given only three interviews in her entire life (she counted one with Mario Benedetti, in 1971; another one with Jorge Albistur, in 1994; and another one with Rosario Peyrou and Pablo Rocca in 1996, but she wasn't counting those with María Esther Gilio, Elena Poniatowska, Hilia Moreira, and Ignacio Cirio), yet she said afterwards and so many times that she fell in love that very night (2013).

How does Vilariño's voice emerge? As is more evident in this case than in others, through her verses. Guerriero interprets, dives into her work, complements it with her biographical reading. She selects poems to convey her passion for Juan Carlos Onetti. Guerriero's profiles go beyond (or deep into) biography because the voices of these intellectuals can be heard in the prose. These are not accounts from the past; in these texts, which set forth a particular (and original) perspective in a way that resembles academic writing, there emerge the voices of these creators and their dialogues with other artists or sources. They also contribute to future research on an artist's work, since, for Guerriero, the work and the personality of an artist are not separated dimensions.

## 5. Conclusion

Villoro defined the chronicle as the "platypus of prose" because in it several genres and subgenres converge. In her artist profiles, Guerriero establishes for herself a goal that is much deeper than informing her audience about any given fact. These biographical and psychological profiles seek to come into these creator's intimate realm, to unmask them, to *deconstruct* fossilized discourses and clichés, to topple totems and idols. To that end, she needs to make use of all journalistic, empathetic, and literary resources. But even before her use of a myriad rhetoric elements comes her gaze, the cornerstone of her profiles. With it, her subjectivity, and her interpretation, she weaves the plots in these profiles. Sometimes her subjects resist this. Ricoeur explains that "self-understanding is an interpretation" (1996, p. 107), which means that the chronicler works with two subjectivities at once: the one she receives the account from, and her own. To deal with the former, she can resort to research or data that confirms or corrects this interpretation of the facts. However, it still doubtless contributes to an account, a plot, that she must complete with other, secondary ones (sources, witnesses, documents, etc.)

Colombian chronicler Alberto Salcedo Ramos has written an ode to Guerriero, “Siempre Leila,” published in *Botellas de naufrago*, where he talks about his colleague’s style: “Curiosity first, and then intuition. Always intuition, and always curiosity” (2015, p. 350). Salcedo thus alludes to Guerriero’s immersive approach (intuition, *intus-legere* or to read inside). This reading takes places on several layers: her subject’s reading of their own life, the author’s reading of her subject’s account, and, last, the reader’s. Ricoeur proposes the reader’s key role as a tool to reduce the aforementioned “chasm between stories and life” (2006, p. 7). The plot is a process rather than a static structure, and Guerriero provides us with possible versions of an existence that the reader shall actively complete.

There is an outcome of Guerriero’s work that is probably not explicitly sought: that of encouraging her subjects to (re)construct their identity –not only through the interview but also through the plot weaved by the author–, to notice how their personal identity, through a narrative identity, acquires a new or a newly-considered dimension. As narrative blueprints built with a certain gaze, plots offer tools for the reader to understand the subjects; and, in Guerriero’s case, for her subjects themselves to confront a possible plot of their own lives, a way of understanding it, a perspective. In this way, Guerriero helps make human lives comprehensible, decode the plots and the devices plots are constructed with, in order to suggest new ones. In this sense, a profile is not merely a subgenre of journalism or a manifestation of narrative journalism, but a fundamentally valuable text in a society that pursues tolerance and empathy.

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