

The leak

Gustavo Ariel Schwartz

For Luisa Etxenike

He didn't hear the bell, he hardly ever did. Slowly and imperceptibly he had become unflappable, immune to certain external stimuli. Otto felt, quite rightly, utterly safe in his tiny predictable world. Is there anywhere safer than somewhere utterly predictable? Probably not. His house, which he sometimes mistook for his world, was an old mansion built in the 16th century, remodelled several times in succession in the centuries that followed. Although it was something that Otto didn't like to acknowledge, the foundations of the house still rested on the ruins of an old 10th-century church that had been knocked down in the early Renaissance. Since that time the house had survived earthquakes, fires, revolutions and all kinds of attacks on it.

Nora opened the door, took her soaking wet coat from her and said that the master was expecting her in his study. She went up the main staircase flanked by a line of portraits of three generations of scientists, including several Nobel Prize winners, who had guarded the house's honour over more than a century. On the first floor, the corridor that led to the study was plastered with diplomas, degrees and awards. She quietly opened the door to the study and walked over to the window opposite the entrance. On the way she carefully observed the huge library, the standard lamp that provided the room with rather paltry light, and the desk where Otto was working that he kept permanently neat and tidy. Otto didn't hear her come in, and only became aware of her presence when she drew back a heavy curtain that covered the window.

“There’s not much light in here,” she said with a certain degree of irony.

“Ana!” he said in surprise. “I didn’t hear you come in.”

He looked at the clock and added:

“I was expecting you at five.”

“There’s still ten minutes to go. If you like, I can go and chat for a bit with Nora.”

“No, it’s alright. I’ll carry on with this afterwards,” he said, scratching his head.

She lit a cigarette and then took a book out of her bag that she placed on the little table next to the sofa. He went up to the table, picked up the book and read the title. With a rather blank stare in his eyes, he pondered for a moment and then smiled.

“So you’re back with your anagrams?”

“As you can see, I just can’t help it.”

“And do you think your readers are going to realise that the main character’s name is an anagram?”

“That depends on how much interest each of them shows. The ones that don’t want to make the effort to try and find something deeper, will just read a story; while the ones that decide to delve a bit further into the characters’ names will be able to grasp the essence of the book as well.”

“I think that you are leaving it all a bit too much to chance.”

“And what do you expect me to do: add an instructions manual?”

“I don’t know, you could suggest the idea of the anagrams somehow.”

“I’ve already done that; don’t worry, I’ve already done that. I’ll be presenting it next week; I presume you’ll be coming, won’t you?”

“I’ve got a lot of work, but I promise I’ll try and squeeze it in. Besides, I think that the presentations of your books are really entertaining: loads of people trying to explain the inexplicable.”

“I don’t see much difference with any of your congresses.”

“Ana... don’t start with that business again.”

She listened and smiled as she made her way towards the desk and took a look at his notes.

“Please don’t touch anything!” he said, sounding worried, as if he knew what he was talking about.

“Are you still working on that business with the mentally disturbed?” she asked.

“Writers are the only ones who are disturbed,” he said sarcastically and added “What I’m analysing is how small disturbances can drastically affect open systems making them stray from equilibrium.”

“Ah!” she said.

By that time the theory of small disturbances in closed systems (those that have no exchanges with the outside world) was well known. Otto then hoped to extend the theory to open systems (those that exchange matter, energy and information with the outside world). Understanding these systems was vital, as a certain amount of evidence was starting to emerge that showed that the huge majority of systems were open, even those that until then had seemed to be closed. He had spent years on this and in the last few months his work had got bogged down.

“And how are getting on with your new theory?” she asked, her intuition allowing her to guess what the answer would be.

“Really badly!” he answered. “I just can’t seem to solve the problem of the exchange of information.”

It was as if the meaning of information depended on where the subject that interpreted it was. Certain information, while it remained outside the system, seemed to be inconsistent with this and even seemed to deny its basic principles when it was interpreted from inside the system. However if for some reason the information leaked through, it suddenly acquired meaning and altered the system by shifting it to a new point of equilibrium.

“And why don’t you talk to Zara?” she asked.

“Don’t even mention her! Whenever she turns up the only thing she does is cause problems.”

“That’s just it!” she exclaimed. “Your problem is that you still see problems as problems, and problems are opportunities; what Zara does is open things up.”

“Come on, Ana! Don’t be ridiculous.”

They had thrown Zara Ramond out of the Academy of Sciences a long time ago claiming that she wasn’t helping to understand reality. Roder, who had founded the Academy and imposed his ideas on it, had personally taken care of expelling her. Now Roder is wasting away and the Academy still hasn’t realised that Zara might be just what it needs to survive.

“If there are things you’re not sure about, you should talk to her,” Ana insisted.

“There’s nothing I’m not sure about!” he shouted angrily.

“In that case I feel really sorry for you; you’re not going to get anywhere like that.”

“You’re wrong, as always. Only certainties allow us to get anywhere.”

“You’re pathetic!” she blurted out. “But maybe I’m just hoping that a fairy godmother will rescue you from the hell you’re going through; otherwise I wouldn’t be talking to you. Just listen to what I’m saying; have a word with Zara.”

“I’m not going to, and that’s it,” he replied.

However his unconscious, that irrational unfaithful lodger that we all carry around inside us, thought differently and reminded him of a story that he already knew by heart. In 1609 Galileo pointed his telescope at the sky and observed four satellites revolving around Jupiter. This dealt a devastating blow to the prevailing dogma that everything revolved around the Earth. The guardians of power, dogma and truth refused to even look through the telescope. “*There was no need to,*” they argued. “*We know that this is utterly ridiculous.*”

She lit another cigarette and went towards the window. It was still raining. She stood there without saying a word, watching the rain for a couple of minutes and then said:

“I was just thinking that your theory and my novel basically come down to trying to solve the same elusive problem.”

“Oh! Do they?” he asked, playing along with her. “And what is that problem?”

“The difference between men and women.”

“Oh yes?” he repeated. “And just what is the difference?”

“Do you know what the difference is? It’s that women let ourselves be penetrated, we are more permeable; and we let ourselves be penetrated in ways that a man would never agree to...”

Just then Nora came into the study carrying a tray with tea and biscuits. He had been saved by the bell once again. However this time, although he still didn’t know why, Otto didn’t feel the same refreshing sense of relief as he had on previous occasions. Otto was puzzled; he didn’t know what to say. He felt that any comment he made would inevitably make him look ridiculous. But basically Otto didn’t even know what to say to himself. He stirred his tea until it was spinning around in the cup and then he asked:

“What time does your flight leave?”

“At eight o’clock.”

“You should already be on your way to the airport! Shall I tell Nora to take you?”

“There’s no need for that, Zara is going to drop by and pick me up. She’s coming along with me for a few days; I think it’s going to do me good.”

“Do what you like; but I’d prefer not to see her,” he said.

“I can’t do anything about it; sooner or later you’re going to bump into her.”

They both thought that it would be better to change the subject and carried on a dull insipid conversation for the time it took them to have two cups of tea and a few biscuits.

A cloud innocently released them and they fell and fell until a black tile decided enough was enough and made them roll on up to a crack that a few days, a few months earlier, the sun and the cold had carefully opened up. She drove in an unconverted convertible along the long path that ran from the entrance of the estate up to the front door of the house; she got out of the car utterly ignoring the fact that it was raining and made her way to the entrance. They meticulously ran along the labyrinthine Random path that the cracks followed, and patiently went down, down, down. Just as she was about to press the bell, she opted for the iron door knocker (*"it's the door knocker,"* Otto thought; *"I haven't heard it for years"*). Squeezed up against each other they waited calmly for the big moment. *"Please, come in,"* Nora said in a friendly voice. And that was where they embarked on their non-mission, like a dance routine that hadn't been choreographed. *"Your name, please?"*. *"Zara, Zara Ramond,"* she replied.

"And what's that noise?" Ana asked.

"Shit, shit! My notes," Otto screamed as he ran towards the desk.

"Drip, drip, drip," the drops kept repeating as they dripped onto his papers.

Otto took an anguished look at his smudged notes and put them away in a drawer. Nora came into the study to let him know that Zara had arrived. Ana put a couple of things away in her bag, said goodbye to Otto and went down with Nora to the entrance hall where Zara was waiting for her. Otto stayed up in the study, lost in thought. Finally he hesitated for a few moments and then tentatively peeked down the stairs. Ana had her back to him, and was putting on her coat while she chatted to Zara. Zara glanced up. She saw him and winked at him. Otto held his breath. Both women went out and Otto went back to the study. He sat down in the sofa and picked up the

book that Ana had left with both hands. He held the edge of the book tightly to his lips and stood there deep in thought. Suddenly he opened the book and started reading it.

“He didn’t hear the bell; he hardly ever did...”

He closed the book and went to his desk. He carefully looked at his notes smudged by the rain again and again. You could no longer make out the original equations but there was something there that irresistibly caught his eye. He couldn’t explain it; nobody could have done, but there was something there in those stains. He picked up a number of blank pages and frenziedly scribbled away on dozens of sheets for several hours. He filled up page after page with formulas and hypotheses and crumpled them up and angrily threw them away. Screwed-up balls of paper bounced out of a waste-paper bin that was already brimming over, and took up strategic positions on the study carpet. The coffee cups piled up on his desk that was now a real mess. In the end Otto was no longer thinking; everything just flowed, later on there would be time to think.

Towards three in the morning the darkness began to lift. The theory was perfectly watertight. Open systems are intrinsically chaotic in nature and are therefore unpredictable. Closed systems are basically predictable, and are unlikely to develop into open systems. Some open systems, unfortunately, degenerate into closed systems.

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