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Preposterous Story with Benefits

I'm going to tell the story of how I wrote, or rather how I have been writing, because I haven't finished it yet, a novel. There is no reason why this should be of any interest to you, except for comedic purposes. Sometimes I think that every human endeavor has a ridiculous side to it, and sometimes I think my novel has no other side. Having said this, I also hope that from this ridiculous story there will arise a couple of reflections, or questions, that may apply to literature in general and not just this particular novel, and may therefore be of some interest for someone who is not this particular writer. Let's call it a preposterous story with benefits.

I began my novel as a short story. Even now, about 500 pages into it, I still think of it, in a way, as a short story, because I can tell you the whole plot in a few minutes. But about plots I shall have something to say later. The point is that I began a story that I was going to call *Zaid*, and which was about a young Algerian who befriends a prostitute who goes by the name Talisa. She wants him to help her with a project of hers, which is to make a film about her own life; except that, because she trusts nobody, she wants to do everything herself: write the script, produce it, do the photography, act, even distribute it... I thought this could be a pretty good story. My wife, I recall, liked the idea too. We were living in Paris then, and we didn't have much money, and she said it would be a good idea for me to write the short story real fast, so I could maybe send it to a magazine, and the money would help us move to Spain, where we had forever wanted to go. Sure, I said, I can write this in one night. When I woke up, one year later, I was beginning to see interesting possibilities for the story. For one thing, I had decided to make it into a novel. It didn't take place in Paris anymore, and the narrator wasn't called Zaid. Now things happened in my native Buenos Aires. I also decided to make it a first-person narrative, in as conversational a tone as possible. And this brings me to my first digression.

Digression number one: what is conversational? What exactly is it made of, the effect that we call conversational, in a narrative? *Journey to the End of the Night*, by Louis-Ferdinand Céline, is a conversational novel. So are long passages in the novels of Philip Roth, and *The Savage Detectives*, by Roberto Bolaño, and many others. But of

course none of these books could possibly be the transcription of real utterances, not just because to reproduce faithfully the vacillations, the ums and ers, the mindless clichés, would make it unreadable, but more importantly, because the spoken language in practice is aimless, or more precisely, takes place within the realm of aimlessness, which is real life. With its laborious morphing into something meaningful, articulate, consistent, which is of course what literature does, oral language becomes falsified. So what is the conversational tone made of? I will submit that the conversational, in a novel, is an effect which is proportionate to the distance that the narrator's style takes from the discourse of power. It is not the rhythm, though rhythm is important, it is not the idioms or the jargon, which are less important: it is the street-smart modulation of truth, a syntax and a vocabulary that purports to express what the written law and the official version of things do not. When Céline has a character, say, about a French colony in Africa: "Ah! Si vous êtes venu pour les tam-tam, mon vieux, vous vous êtes pas trompé de colonie!...", he is consciously sketching the shadow of the official discourse of the French Empire, expressing its cynical negative, and that creates the effect we call conversational. The corollary is that the more corrupt a society is, the more rigid and unjust, the more its façades are devoid of content and the more its official discourse differs from verifiable experience, the more the writer has to gain by recreating the modulations of the oral, where the subversive power of language lies.

So of course I set the novel in Argentina. By then, two years after the first draft, my wife and I were living in Catalonia. One night, at a party in Barcelona, a famous literary agent mistook me for writer Andrés Neuman. I tried to impersonate him as best as I could, but the agent realized his mistake and, no doubt out of embarrassment, offered his services to me. I was beside myself with joy. A novel almost finished, and a celebrated shark of an agent to open the way for it! He asked me how much longer it was going to take me to finish it, and I confidently said three months. Tops. I remember the conversation because they were showing on the TV of the bar one of the first games of the 2006 World Cup. That was a good year for wine, too. After the first eight months passed without the novel being finished I began to spill my coffee every time my agent called. I wanted him to love me, I longed to hold a special place in his heart, for him to buy me dinners and always remember my birthday, and yet I refused to give him the

child he wanted. Still, it was for a good cause; for now, I thought, I had measured at last the actual scope the novel. The story about the woman who attempts to make a movie out of her own life was now contained within a whodunit narrative. There was a murder, there was an investigation. This, in turn, was contained within a conspiracy narrative. A secret society sets to create a new, utopian State in northern Argentina. For this they mobilize tremendous resources, generations of manpower, unspeakable effort. I was enveloping wild projects within wild projects, which roughly corresponds, I think, to the structure of actual experience. One or two problems remained. I knew nothing whatsoever about crimes, detectives, or even detective novels; I had no knowledge whatsoever about secret societies. I spent a whole year researching and learning the basic structure of thriller novels. My wife was sympathetic, though by now I would sometimes now and then catch in her face a fleeting expression of concern. Which brings me directly to my second digression: suspense.

What is suspense? Suspense is the poetic stylisation of our innate need to understand, of our continued search for relations of cause and effect, as well as our continued search for patterns. There are other ways, to be sure, to recreate this. One may think of Kafka, who keeps his characters in a constant search for answers, while he deprives them of any solid reality. The great Kafka was clearly not a suspenseful writer. But I still find it suggestive, and worth a try, to make my characters evolve within a thriller plot—or let's say a thriller plot of sorts—while their inner lives and their world-outlook evolve parallel to this plot, resonate with it, and so to speak acquire shape and momentum and consistency thanks to it. The thriller plot is a catalyst of the characters' inner processes. This, to me, is a simple matter of realism. We do not, for example, lead our love lives in a state of theoretical detachment; our love lives are more usually ridden with questions, doubts, deductions, provisional conclusions; we look for clues, suspects, links, motivations. In our love lives, like Philip Marlowe, we are looking for certain answers, but in the process we come to forget the original question. (Or, rather, we realize that the original question was irrelevant.) Like any good old hard-boiled detective, we dwell among transgressors, and we transgress. The same goes for our professional lives, and our fear of illness and death, and our urge to be accepted and respected, and our way of dealing with loss, and our way of missing our childhood... To

use the devices of thriller or detective novels to me is not some kind of cute homage, or the proverbial postmodern infatuation with genre; it is the closest I can get to recreating experience in a way that is reasonably close to my own.

In 2009 my wife left me. She said if I ever finished the novel I could give her a call. This gave me an additional idea for the novel, which implied the addition of about 200 pages, but I wasn't worried because I thought I could easily tackle those in three months, tops. By the way, I should mention that I own a very nice house in Santiago de Chile. I have been living and teaching there for five years now. I have a good studio with a view of the neighbors' red tile rooftops, and they have honeysuckle that climbs up the side of their house and flowers in flower-pots that attract some amazing butterflies. Chile has changed. The world has changed. My agent doesn't call all that much anymore. Now I think of us as just friends. These things are natural. It's all a matter of personal growth. And of pages produced per year. I think that ultimately it's all for the best.

Anyhow, now the novel was separated in three different books, each featuring a different set of characters, and written in a different style and with a distinct structure, though the conspiracy continued to be the bridge across the three. In the first book, there is the murder of a famous rugby player and the ensuing investigation, and in the process of investigating, a whole network of corruption gets revealed, but the original question remains unanswered: who killed the rugby player? In the second book—and this was my new idea—a married couple takes up the investigation years later, and they discover that at the heart of the network was a strange woman, a former prostitute who goes by the name Natalia, and who, although she is supposed to be an informant for the police, a stool pigeon, she is actually a prominent agent of the secret society, as ready as any of them to sacrifice everything and everyone for the sacred goal of building up the new State. This investigation—which include detailed accounts of the secret society's history, from its foundation in 1817 to the early 2000's, as well as a minute description of the future State and its language, its laws, its economy, its arts, its sciences and geography—takes up most of the married couple's life, and in more ways than one reflects their marriage itself, even as it consumes it; so this second book is a marriage novel as well as a conspiracy novel. The third book takes place in the year 2047. The State has indeed been created. There was a war between Argentina and the separatists, which the former

lost badly. A vast zone of northern and central Argentina was occupied, and a fascist-type puppet government installed in Buenos Aires. An underground resistance movement took it upon itself to restore the Republic, and eventually succeeded. A member of this resistance movement is the one who finally discovers, sixty years after the murder of the rugby player that took place in the first book, who did it and why. I have yet to write those final pages. But why worry? I'm sure I can write them in the remaining weeks of my residency in Iowa. I say four more weeks. Tops. All that writing takes is a little sacrifice.

And what is sacrifice? This is my third and last digression. The last change I have made to the structure of the novel concerns the narrator, or rather the narrators. In the first book there are about forty-five. In the second book there are only two: the husband and the wife. In the third there is only one: the resistance fighter. So you could say that this is a pyramidal novel. But one thing all those narrators have in common: they have been the instruments, almost always unwittingly or unwilling, of the conspiracy. I wanted this to be the story of a grand project as told by the poor bastards who had to be sacrificed for its sake. Imagine a story of the world as told by its losers. By the ones who were just stepping stones, by the discarded, the rejected, the used and thrown away. A story of a skyscraper as told by the scaffolding and the junk. Or rather, you don't need to imagine much. Ultimately, the idea in this book is that a project —*any* human project, from the creation of a new State to the sustaining of a couple— involves to some extent the sacrifice of others. By sacrifice I mean a wide range of possibilities, from the frustration of other people's projects to their physical elimination. It is humanly impossible to measure the exact amount of pain caused in this way by any project, or the quantity of people sacrificed for it. If you scratch the surface of any endeavor, you find traces of sacrifice. Human bones, so to speak. The fact that those bones are also found, and not in small quantities, along the road an individual has traveled in writing a novel, is something that I leave for you, aspiring writers, to ponder.