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**Footnotes to the Book of Creation**

**On reading during the process of writing fiction**

Towards the end of his life, our beloved and hideous master Jorge Luis Borges used to declare, as a kind of reply to the continuous and almost mechanical compliments he received: “Well, I cannot really say if I have been a good writer, but certainly I have been an excellent reader. And I’m very proud of it.” In most of the cases, people considered this declaration either as a proof of an excessive modesty, very suitable for an elder genius, or as another irritating use of Borges’ corrosive talent for irony and paradox, moreover, a proof of his false humbleness. Twenty years later, I am inclined to think of his phrase as an extremely subtle definition that invited us to consider reading and writing as not opposite terms; furthermore, a definition of Borges’ work which was in itself the aftermath of his readings, the transcription of that extremely complex process we call “to read”, and which involves not only the mere activity of decoding certain signs, but also many and various forms of reply to the author. In these notes, following the tracks of the master, I will try to explore the role of reading in the process of writing fiction, intending to explain why I feel that fiction is a dialogue between us writers and the storytellers both from the past and the future, a dialogue that helps humanity to survive the limitations of any epoch.

**Reading the silence**

It may sound rather too obvious if I say that every piece of writing derives from a previous reading. But we are less used to analyze which precise aspects of the text are so capable of awakening our imagination and generating thus our own fiction. In my case, the most important source of my stories is the silence of the books I read, a silence that is not at all a void, but a conspicuous, deafening sign of perhaps the deepest truth of the texts. This silence can be the product of a deliberate technique of the author, perhaps the most important proof of the greatness of his skill. For learning to write fiction is, of course, learning to use words; but from then on, to learn to write is to learn how to make as much silence as possible, leaving alive on the page just those remains that can suggest by themselves the whole meaning of the story, and some hint of the mystery of the world.

But what I find much more inspiring in my readings is that other kind of silence of the book, the one who comes out of the incapability of the writer, so extreme in certain cases that even the writer can be unaware of it. I never read any author just because he or she is my contemporary or my compatriot: being a story a pattern made out of the chaotic impressions of everyday life, a pattern that in itself proposes a structure of reality, I choose to read those novels whose patterns seem to give meaning to my own experience. But there is always a certain secret zone of reality that keeps off that pattern, a secret zone reluctant to be imprisoned in words, and which remains in silence. This kind of silence is for me a riddle that passes from one writer to another, a kind of challenge we accept handling the sword of fiction. And that is perhaps the kind of defiance that Isak Dinesen was thinking of when she adopted for life this ancient motto: *Je responderai*.

When I am writing fiction, I try not to read novels or short stories by others; If I do, I feel dangerously and often irremediably exiled from that imaginary world I am creating day by day: like any passionate lover, fantasy demands our entire attention; like any decent wife, monogamy. But certainly there is one, and only one exception, and it is too important to not talk about it right now. Among the many rites I accomplish every morning in order to enter the temple of writing, that is, to provoke in me that state of autohypnosis that is the ground for growing stories, I always read one chapter or two by that author I currently call “my guru”. And I read, most of all, to “pick up the tone” of his or her narrative, as if I were the only visible singer of a chorus scattered all through space and time. (And let me say that some weeks ago, when I found myself without any sugar for my tea –tea is another very important rite of my mornings- and I knocked at the door of my new friend the German novelist Mathias Goritz just to ask him for some; when I found him reading *Little Dorrit* before starting to write his own novel, I believed I had found a member of that secret brotherhood –for I have also adopted Dickens as one of my cherished morning shamans.)

Now, as every storyteller in this room might agree, tone is probably one of the most mysterious elements of narrative. You can define more or less clearly what plot is, or what a character is; but every time you try to define tone in front of an audience you begin to utter such confuse definitions, that they all look at you as if you were an insensitive idiot. To restore my dubious prestige among my pupils, and thus to keep on earning money from them, I found only one clear approximation of that subject. Lets consider, I say, the aboriginal people of Patagonia, and see how in their skillful art of storytelling the tone changes according to the circumstance in which the singer is; for instance, the intimate meal beside the hearth at dawn, when they sing stories related to the familiar totem, or the annual celebration of *camaruco*, when they relate ancient battles or mythical legends. In fiction writing, the accuracy of the tone depends on how precisely you can imagine the circumstances of the narrator; and in my fictions, like in Dickens or Conrad or Isak Dinesen, for example, the narrator is always an oral one, and he is always in an intimate but solemn situation, that is, sharing with friends the painful beauty of epics, a situation that allows, incidentally, the A major tone of irony and the E minor of compassionate lyric.

### Reading ourselves

It may also seem rather too obvious if I remark that we writers are the first readers of our own works –and in many cases the only one, but that’s another point. What I want to point out is not the final reading of an accomplished work of ours, a reading in which we are equal to any other reader, but on the role of reading while the work is still in progress. Writing a story, I mean, *going on* writing a story, implies the constant, careful reading and rereading of what is already written, asking to each element of the text about its own future and destiny, in which way they will obey the Ancient Laws of Storytelling: is trying to foresee, like the ancient magicians, the future in the shape of a flock of words. To any character, any sentence, any rhythm in our story we ask: *Where are you going to?*, or, if we are really courageous and sincere, *Where must you go, ever if you yourself don’t want to be carried that way or me myself hate to deal with such destinies?* But there is something more to tell about us as readers of our own works.

As far as I know, most of the writers answer that boring question, *whom do you write for?* in two different ways, much more close to one another than they may seem; either they say “I write for myself” or “I write for others”, be those “others” the members of this or that elite or the multitudinous monster they call Market. But when a work of fiction is still in progress, we do not consider the “reader” as a person. It is but an element, a reference, an imaginary character if you want, absent of the story and, nevertheless, determining what we can say right now and what we must postpone for later or for ever. In fact, we do not imagine the “reader” receiving merely a message, but having slowly an *experience*, the experience of the story. (And that “experience of reading”, as Flannery O’Connor says, can never be expressed with other words but those of the story itself –its words, let me add, but also its silence; and from this experience of silence derives, as I have already said, the necessity of a reply in the same terms, that is, of fiction.) Now, in order to prove the real effects of the story we are telling, we constantly stop writing and become readers of what is already written; we try, as honestly and strongly as we can, to become that possible reader who experiences the story little by little, without the least suspicion of what may come to him. And though we never succeed, of course, on becoming that kind of innocent Mr. Hyde, if the story is true, if it really comes from the heart of our life, we are really changed by the revelations of reading.

### **Reading the world**

Now, as many of my stories, as I have already said, were born in old books; as many of my of my stories are nothing but an image of an ancient book which I have set in motion, I’ve been most frequently confronted with another boring question: *how much do you read for research?* In fact, during the process of writing fiction, I read a lot of essays, books of history, newspapers and every kind of testimony I can find about the time I am supposed to depict. But the interesting question would be: What do you expect to find in those old texts, what is really *useful* for your stories? To tell you the truth, I don’t read anything to understand this or that time, to discover under the chaotic appearances of the past this or that pattern, to know what Hobsbawm or E. P. Thompson, for instance, thought about England of the nineteenth century; my vision of that time, my own image of that world as it appears in *Inglaterra*, my last novel, had been already settled for ever when I began to research. What I look for in my researches are just details, apparently insignificant details of the reality of old times, details that I can describe clearly in my novel by including “sensorial images”, that is: smells, colors, textures, tastes, sounds. This kind of details has an enormous power to awake our imagination and, above all, to convince the reader of the truth of our fiction. If you write, “the grandmother would wear an apron”, the reader should be half convinced of the truth of the story; but if you say “Granny Millicent wear a gray shabby apron from Goritz, Adaf and Co.” then the reader will believe religiously in your story. ¡What a serious writer! they will say. For to express the truth of the story, which is the true of life too, you don’t need to say what it s real: you only need to learn how to lie.

In a long essay called *Ecrire*, “To Write” Marguerite Duras describes wonderfully how, when we are writing a story and it develops as it must, when we feel, in fact, that the story “tells itself” almost without our help, all the world looks to our eyes like writing, a writing strictly connected with our texts. “All the world seems to write with us”, Duras says. I wonder now if that is not what we look for in writing: to feel, at least for one moment, that the whole universe is a book and we poets are just making footnotes to enlighten the wonderful and obscure language of things. Wonderful and obscure, yes, but understandable.

I wonder if we all write stories just to read the silence at the end of words, and to read there, at the end, the meaning of “hope”, or, if you want, “faith”.