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Slight Shifts

I live in a country where you have to wait in line for everything. Dealing with tax forms, going to a concert, paying at the grocery store, finding a table in a restaurant, waiting for the bus, buying subway tokens, making an appointment at the dentist, taking your seat at the theater. In other words, for everything. In fact, I'd say that we can't locate Argentina's mythic roots in the tango or yerba mate tea or in figures like Evita or Maradona but in our custom of waiting in line. Incidentally, everyone waits in these lines in his or her own way. There are those who use the lowest or most sophisticated tricks to cut in line; those who, reacting to this, cause scandals, complete with ad hominem attacks; those who take advantage of the time provided to read a book; those who distract themselves with their cell phones; those who stare stupidly into a fixed point in space, like cows traveling dully on their way to the slaughterhouse.

As for me, I can only wait in line if I shift ten or so inches to one side or another. Right or left, it doesn't matter. Nor does it matter if I have to wait patiently for hours. What does seem crucial to me is to shift those few inches, which allows me to breathe, to tone down the cultural claustrophobia that begins to take hold of me in such moments. And I've often thought that this minor shift also applies to my work with literary genres.

It all began with a trip to the South, to the Deep South of Patagonia, in the early nineties. As soon as I received my literature degree, I got a job translating the hand-written diaries of a British traveler who had been one of the first Europeans to settle there in the mid-nineteenth century. The job entailed rather bizarre circumstances, chief among them spending two months holed up in a remote estate in Tierra del Fuego.

I could linger on many aspects of this singular experience at the estate, but here I'll stick to a single one: my encounter with the family library, an immense library, riddled with books, their covers destroyed, in which you could barely make out names that, in a life absorbed with reading, had never before crossed my mind: Pigafetta, George Anson, James Cook, Alessandro Malaspina, Musters, Shackleton, Thomas Falkner, D'Orbigny, Sarmiento de Gamboa, Florence Dixie, Rosita Forbes. Travelogues, an infinite number of them. I would spend the day translating one traveler and the nights reading the rest, all that I could. This was not due to my taste for adventure, as you might imagine, and even less to an interest in disciplines like geography and botany (which frequently appear there). What captivated me was the ambivalence that emerged from these tales, the way in which their amalgamation of document, experience, imagination, and politics called into

question not only the problem of literary genre but also the unequivocal distinction between fiction and non-fiction.

In these tales of exploration, what I am calling a “document” takes the form of geological, geographical, historical, zoological, botanical and anthropological reports that were read by great empires in different periods of history as objective and necessary information to uphold acts of colonization and appropriation. Keeping this colonial context in mind, I read with an eye towards discerning which narrative strategies the travelers turned to in order to respond – or to pretend they were responding – to these official missions. More than a few times I confirmed the extent to which imagination played its part and the extent to which the purported asceticism of a report was in reality a story no different than a novel. In my fervent readings during those months, and in the many years that followed my stay in the southern estate, I understood Borges as I never had before. There is no document that is not warp and weave, that is not fabrication, I realized, almost paraphrasing him.

These travelers’ tales functioned as crucial precursors when my own narrative also began to take shape as an amalgamation of document, experience, imagination, and politics. *Mutatis mutandis*, naturally. In my case, I call “document” those materials that underlie a particular story. I don’t refer to precursors – by which I mean those readings that constantly emerge as our writing advances or that we don’t even perceive because they are so much a part of us – but to the defined series of reading always implied in the writing of a particular story. In fact, each of my books has a sort of individual library, made up of other books, magazines, newspaper clippings, quotes from the internet, oral testimonies, lines from a song, legal files, reports of acts, letters written by hand, diaries.

I use these materials as much in my fiction as in my non-fiction writing, a genre that in Argentina is known as *crónica*, a term I will use from now on. In this terrain, that of the *crónica*, what I call “document” is, for many other people, “reality.” What I take as a construction would appear to be, for others, an autonomous entity that exists, a universe that is out there and in which the writer of *crónicas* immerses him- or herself, working fundamentally on the basis of interviews and journalistic sources. In contrast, in my case, I don’t believe that there’s anything out there, no trophy of discovery to bring back to my desk. If anything, it is a construction that is interesting to take apart, to explore. That is why my *crónicas* are always devoted to exploring some myth, to probing its character, the way it functions, its cracks and crevices: not to reveal truths but to reformulate hypotheses. In order to do this, I research a variety of proliferating, excessive, eclectic documents. I also incorporate testimonies that emerge from interviews, but I don’t do this according to the journalist’s code of ethics, which separates me from those writers of *crónicas* who are obsessed with finding out a certain kind of truth. None of those tapes that can be played back in a legal setting. When the interviews are over, I simply jot down a couple of sentences (never more than three) that I feel

condense something important that the interview can add to the subject I'm working on. Then, when I sit down to write, I deploy those two or three sentences throughout an entire chapter, for example, in which that crucial element appears cross-hatched by the imagination, by observation, by supposition. I consider all of these to be valid strategies for non-fiction writing because, as I've said, I don't believe in a truth to be discovered but in a series of hypotheses to be explored and redefined. It goes without saying, too, that this disruption of journalistic protocol and methods means that many do not consider my *crónicas* to be *crónicas*; or that, at any rate, it gives rise to the doubt as to whether they are really *crónicas*.

Something slightly similar happens when I write novels. I explicitly incorporate the document as part of the narration in an attempt to challenge the authority of the narrative voice on the one hand and, on the other, the category of fiction as something that emerges purely from the work of the imagination of a creative mind. Without my intending to, I've noticed that this strategy also challenges some of my readers. I think it's also related to the political aspect that I spoke of earlier, which in my writing is evidently not linked to colonizing designs but to a different kind of exploration. I don't write to "tell a story." I write novels as a way of probing the state of a question today, and therein lies the political stance of my fiction. In my last book, for example, I explore the circumstances, the definition, of what it means to be an artist today: the tensions with respect to tradition, the market, new technologies, show business, institutions. By no means does this imply subsuming literature to sociology or a like-minded science: in my explorations, the literary tone – the precise sentence, the appropriate breath, the rhythm – has pride of place; the tone is the *starting place*. What it does imply is a certain disregard for aspects such as the meanderings of the plot, characters understood as profound psychologies to be developed, and the entertainment value of narrative. This surprises some readers, who feel they are missing what they usually expect to find in a novel. It also makes others ask if what they are reading is, in fact, a novel.

In my approach to genre, as you can see, something similar happens as in the phenomenon I began by describing, when I shift a few inches to the right or the left while standing in line. Inevitably, someone will approach me in doubt, not knowing where the line starts or where it continues, someone who is not sure where to stand, and then he or she asks me: "Excuse me, but are you in line?"

Translated from the Spanish by Sarah Ann Wells