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## WHY DO YOY WRITE?

My literary vocation, my way of facing it, my cycles of creative euphoria or penitentiary silence, are usually questioned beyond what I can reasonably answer. As if those who question me, regular or circumstantial readers, had separated for themselves the right to ask me, without prior explanations, all of a sudden, why do you write?

Slyly, as he who returns the blow, I should answer by asking, why do you read? Well, writing and reading formulate a charming conversation between two people who love the same thing: the shifting contents of words. If the reader is always looking for a book that grants him satisfaction, the writer is always waiting for the reader to build a strong bridge to the shore of his book, a reader willing to transform the book into a ticket for a singular trip of motionless appearance. How often the reader assumes his role, the work resuscitates from the book's tomb, the harmony of its construction is redefined. How the writer lends his voice to the work's voice, the work is born again and it recuperates its old novelty.

If the question "Why do you write?" was encouraged by a faulty or frivolous intelligence, I would perceive it quickly- which I would also repair if its emission came from reproach. But, no. It is an honest question, motivated by the desire to go deeper into the labyrinth of the writing vocation, sincerely interested in the creative process that culminates in what is, with determination, known as the work. It is a question in which the surprise caused by the expression of talent dedicated to raising autonomous realities synthesizes in words as its only material and punctuation marks as the mold that expands or restricts words.

### **Praising the period and the comma**

Commas have not been given the recognition they deserve as indicator of the pulmonary breath of the text. The semantic possibilities of the period have not been assessed either. Although in two key works of our times, *Waiting for Godot* and *The place without limits*, the period is given duties that go beyond the mere notice of the end of a sentence. On one hand, duties that fall into portraying characters and outlining their insufficiencies; on the other, favoring an atmosphere of torment and moral intoxication. Beckett's Nihilism, the existential unemployment of Vladimir and Estragon, navigate between the points of their truncated conversations, while they wait for the damned Godot, this unknown person whose informality makes him postpone his appearance, once and again. And the hidden personality of Pancho Vega, a typical Hispanic American macho affected by an ambiguous sexuality, it advances between suspension points with which José Donoso breaks down his revealing, terrifying nightmares.

### **Reader as authorizer**

Because literature, although it is modeled on the appearances of reality, constitutes an autonomous reality, an independent reality that promulgates the laws that support it. At the risk of critics periodically writing some explanatory theories, whose eagerness to innovate sometimes threatens simple intellection, at the risk of the literary processes of canonization or

mercantile commotion steaming up the polite surprise given by the lack of foresight, the work retains an integrity that cannot be postponed, an integrity that resists the reader's defiance. The reader is, on the other hand – whether he wants to or not – we repeat, the subject that reactivates the work's beauty or echo, complexity or transparency, each time he sits down to read it, each time he sits down to authorize it.

There is no need to look for the reason of the artistic work outside of it although the culture of the time and the author's sensory biography are implied in it; it is up to the reader to resuscitate it from the book, judge it, share the news of his finding, and revitalize it with a conventional or arbitrary interpretation. In effect, to go down the path covered by the author's talent- a talent that on a daily basis, with growing conviction, I associate with the damned illumination of patience.

### **Blessings of Patience**

The word patience would seem to take away divine merit and prestige from writing; it would seem to take away angelical light, eternity. The word patience would seem to be destined for corporal use such as sports and work associated with physical performance. The word patience seems strange or forced when judging writing.

### **It is not.**

Patience must be made responsible essentially for the blossoming of talent; patience promoted to passion; patience that makes the romantic topic of inspiration or the state of grace ineffective. Let's agree that the romantic burden still survives and says that literary writing is done after a high, an almost mystical trance, or a supernatural possession.

Of course, there are special days when sensibility or intelligence intensify, become more evident, they flow naturally and with such ease that they seem to have been determined by a superior conscience. With those special days, two Spanish American authors today circumscribed to a second place in literary history, Juana de Ibarburu and Porfirio Barba Jacob, have composed optimistic salutations that have remained as an unexpected parenthesis in their complete works.

But those days when sensibility and intelligence, by themselves, merely produce enough fuel to create art are not frequent; they barely guarantee the necessary energy for the work to begin laying a foundation, word by word, sentence by sentence, paragraph by paragraph until it finally becomes a solid, spacious, durable structure. What else is *Don Quijote de la Mancha*, aside from a universe full of spiritual greatness, if not a perfect and unmistakable verbal construction, a stunning and dazzling one? What else is *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, aside from a saga where each passion finds its place, a monumental construction in which a single word – solitude – possesses the virtuosity of being the key that opens and closes lives? "Hammer, guide me to the heart of the mystery," begged Enrique Ibsen; a plea somewhere between stunning and moving that would serve as his epitaph. The plea to the humble but useful tool patented the path of work, of effort, of trusting dedication followed by him when shaping his great fictions: *The Doll House*, *Enemy of the People*, *Columns of Society*, *Spectrums*.

The unshakable will of saying and the visceral need of finding an original expression may be listed as consequences of patience, as well as the Lope de Vega ideal that a clear verse would come from a dark draft. And that other monster of nature, Pablo Picasso, whose creations impose his name on every list of art as rebellion, of art as the unobjectionable translation of the abstract to the perceptible, he explained, between proud and boastful: "I don't search, I find." The proclamation of his encounters was no more than a declaration of his ability to throw himself into work, his indissoluble marriage vows to patience.

## **But, let's go back to our starting point.**

### **French Interrogation**

The last time I heard the question: Why do you write? was in the mouth of a journalist from the Parisian *Liberation*, Jean Francois Fogel, who was in charge, along with his colleague, Daniel Rondeau, of preparing a special edition that compiled the answers given to this question by writers from around the world. The edition had an honorable antecedent.

In 1919, *Liberation* asked Paul Valery, Louis Aragon, André Breton, Paul Eluard, and other French writers the same question, who in time would base their literary work on unrestricted audacity. Eluard had already written the poem where the verse "Hello, sadness" appears, which years later would be the title of a precocious novel by Francoise Sagan and many years later would be the title of a ballad that showed off Isabel Pantojas' faltering voice, a singer whose love life has the tempo of a triple paso doble.

On the other hand, Breton had not published his surrealist manifest nor arrived in beloved and beautiful Mexico and Valery had not published the incomparable lyrical work that constitutes *El cementerio marino*. But in his early work an advanced and unmanageable literary practice could be seen; practice that he would move up from until he set the base for the cited works. Works that found additional motivation in the disasters of the recently-concluded war and that went on to be adequately known as World War I. As if by intuition or knowledge, from here on, there would never be isolated wars because the Universe recorded its new and definitive way: that of a reckless soup of villages. As if by intuition or knowledge, political and cultural notions –central and peripheral, orthodoxy and marginality – prepared to suffer a destroying revision.

### **Words march fragile and aloof**

André Maurois wrote, as conclusion of his tight and excellent essay on André Gide's work, that the role of the writer is to construct the building and the reader's role was to occupy it. Is it that those who ask me "Why do you write?" are avid readers who occupy my literary buildings, who find purpose and manner similar. Meaning that they are followers of my inventions who, motivated by their devotion, approach me with the password they found less troubling.

The recurring question, redeemed by good intentions, places writing in the category of arbitrary and dispensable work. Behind it is the suspicion that a writer's work is nothing more than a hobby that answers to no boss, a flexible entertainment done at odd times from anywhere. Even when lying under the shade of a pine tree or even from the inactivity associated with a bed or a hammock. That is, like a tension and sweat-free activity, like a variation of leisure time or time off, like a distracting passing of time in the unoccupied writer's days and hours.

Because only a polite, problem-free inoccupation would authorize working with words, an inexact work then. That between words there are secret corridors and drawbridges as poet José Gorostiza states when he dares to specify the difficulty of poetry. And through a tribute to dictionary done in prose, comparable in effectiveness and beauty to "Oda al diccionario" by Pablo Neruda, a very brilliant Dominican writer, Manuel Rueda, celebrates the difficulties it solves. Therefore, does the question "Why do you write?" have some censorship, a call to common sense?

A surgeon is never asked why he operates, unless he needs to know the patient's status. And that will be from a close relative as the question drops if it is cousins, aunts, uncles, or neighbors. A mason is not asked why he mixes cement and sand, nor is a cook asked why she dresses vegetables she mixed in the bowl. Who asks the fireman why he puts out the fire or the lawyer why he defends the criminal? Every trade or profession defines its work and its reach as soon as it is named: seamstress, pilot, auto mechanic, gravedigger.

### **Are they answers or alibis?**

On the other hand, insistently, those who write are constantly asked why they do it. Just like if it was a shady or criminal manner, a matter to be suspicious of, a volatile or impractical matter. Some writers, who soon realized that the question could be asked at the first chance people had, have patented an answer that allowed them to get out of it gracefully and with spark. Among the numerous ones that go around, almost ready to integrate a think and ingenious volume, I prefer those of two writers of exceptional strength, who are my friends: Gabriel García Márquez and Juan Goytisolo.

The former has coined an answer that does not smell of guava but it does smell of fragrant trap: I write so that my friends will love me more. The response has much of *greguería*. Although in Ramonian *greguería* paradox is in charge of the unusual replies. Aside from confirming the frolicsome character of the universal Colombian, the answer presents a wonderful trick. García Márquez confesses that he writes to put others into debt with affection, to satisfy expectation by means of his creative genius. Juan Goytisolo, more enigmatic than Gabriel García Márquez, more devoted to the ideal of complex writing, says that when he finds out why he writes he will stop doing so. The response suggests that in each of his works, unconsciously a theory of self-knowledge is created- it is a search for an answer whose fate lies in its possible discovery.

On the other hand, Rosario Castellanos, the admirable Mexican writer, expresses that she considers not lived what is not written, a happy paraphrase of Jorge Manrique's verses – "Daremos por no venido lo pasado" (The past never came). An appropriate question to ask Rosario Castellanos would be: What do you live for?

I am convinced that the question "Why do you write?" has other questions just like the surprising Chinese box holds other stories; that the question hides a false bottom, just like trunks from where magicians escape to the applause of an audience who appreciates the effectiveness of the trick.

Even so, since the question is recurrent, since it seems that I should give a fluent and convincing answer, sooner or later, like a young person usually asks, perhaps scared by the commitment forced upon by the artistic vocation, I have begun to reason, pencil in hand, about why I write.

### **Little by little, without a commotion**

It shouldn't surprise you that it is now that I have decided to take on such an unpromising inventory. I publicly express my gratitude to the maturity acquired in time, the reduction of anxiety that, in many occasions, has startled my literary vocation, making me assume the penitential silence that I have already referred to. An anxiety that, on the other hand, has saved me from reducing writing to an industrial production, of confusing it with megalomaniacal graphomania, of giving in to the temptation of cheating them with a look-alike. I have published what I have believed pertinent, responsible, and necessary even if I have occasionally gone into what some of my good friends call the sin of un-editing. It also explains that it is now that the years ring my sonata of autumn, now that I live a happy reconciliation with my complexity, that person who has very little relationship with the sounds of those two illegitimate daughters of work and patience known as fame and celebrity, when I accept to bring forward an introductory reflection, a reflection in a low tone, of my writing, of its voices, of the reasons that concur in it.

### **Believe me.**

I have never had the temperament required to lie in life; I risk disappointing those who love lies without fearing the consequences. I have only wanted, only tried to lie when facing a blank page, going into a precarious trance of a lesser but diligent god, a god that awards

destinies and solves difficulties, a god that pulls the strings of his characters with an expensive mercy, such a poor god that his heaven is on earth.

I try, then, a speculation to find the impossible answer. Speculation prepares to acknowledge that writing is mostly seen as a hobby that gets its cultivator certain notoriety. Speculation proposes, in second place, that the act of writing is sustained by reasons that go beyond writing in itself: fame, money, travel, the image of a star.

Of course, I don't mean writing forms, employment applications, reports, business letters; writing branded by typing and which is done after elementary training. Of course, I mean the other writing, the plenitude of writing, the one that drinks from the fountain of imagination, the one composed of suggestive rhythms and which rises on the page like an impassive sculpture of words, the writing that is forced to find the precise tone before settling on the page.

I mean the act of writing that, in the absence of other coherent and rational explanations, tries to define itself by means of some metaphors that allude to torture, anguish, and war. Like the metaphor of demons. Like the metaphor of circular obsessions. Like the metaphor of the battle with the angel. In the end, arduous writing, precarious writing, writing questioned by doubt, writing fallen out with arrogance – ignorance's twin sister.

After making the necessary introspection, after reviewing in the fragile archive of the memory a few of my works, I can then confess that, in general, I write to strike up a live dialogue to critique and crossfire, with my country and my time; to mediate between the astonishments produced by the reality that surrounds me and how I endure it. Which is an exceptional risk if you live in the West Indies, if you are a son of the Caribbean, that mind-blowing archipelago of borders.

### **Caribbean Sea, stretch out in my spirit**

The Caribbean is always a border, it is always mixed. To the extreme that only a paradox has the dialectical competence to characterize it: the only pure thing in the Caribbean is impurity. Racial jumble, idiomatic jumble, religious jumble, ideological jumble, political jumble, the jumble of different poverties, make the Caribbean a ripping place according to Palés Matos and Jean Alex Phillips' point of view, from Jamaica Kincaid and Reynaldo Arenas; a place of municipal roots according to the points of view of Derek Walcott, Marcio Véléz Maggiolo, Aimé Césaire, and Ana Lydia Vega; a dishearteningly exotic place according to the point of view of Graham Greene and V.S. Naipaul. At the same time, a hard and bitter place for the arts, a destructive place above all. In the geography where hunger rules, the artist is condemned to serve as pariah or comedian, as a foreigner at home or nauseating flatterer of power, the frowned upon weaver of the history of the accidental tribe, as Fedor Dostoevski calls the country of birth.

Whether the crosspieces are made of water or salt, a country in the shape of an island is a country in the shape of a jail. Sooner or later, the Caribbean imposes emigration, wandering, and exile on its people. If emigration is legalized, the trip has the flying bus as its legal transportation. If emigration is illegalized, if the fierceness of the seas is provoked, if the sharks' famine is provoked, the trip has a fishing boat, a raft as its transportation.

From the islands that travel magazines catalog as paradise, to the islands that news agencies catalog as controversial, the Caribbean is made up of a mass of false postcards. Behind the idyllic façade countries that are hungry for food, literacy, and justice drag themselves. Behind the controversial façade castes snake their way separating the most unexpected privileges for themselves.

I also write to share the satisfaction and good luck that being a Caribbean man have given me. A Caribbean man, native of Puerto Rico, of mulatto signs: dark skin, wide nose, thick lips, curly hair.

In an abbreviated way, I summarized the previous comment, as I would like to place an immediate obstacle to what tastes like demagogy, whether in appearance or in reality.

**I am not guilty, hear me my dear siblings.**

I have never practiced the illusion of coming from a place other than where I come from. Neither have I had hopes of being someone other than who I am. At the same time, because to me the idea that there is an intrinsic merit in national origin has never been sane, intelligent, or tolerable, I warn that I have never lost sleep over the absolute impossibility of being, for example, North American.

In addition, said dream has always seemed to me as the height of outrage, the superior paradigm of stupidity. With no need to defraud our own nature, settled to the core in what is ours, be it man or woman, yellow or mixed race, religious or agnostic, European or from the New World, heterosexual or homosexual, young or old, Puerto Rican or North American, there is enough adventure and meaning, there's plenty of complexity and destiny, to be able to move any vocation forward, to be able to discern any project.

In that sense, in the fact of being Puerto Rican without traumatism or regret, without giving in an apex to the dangers of being a victim, grabbing patriotism when it has been necessary but discrediting jingoism when it has been necessary, I have searched until I have found them, the materials with which to build my work. A work that has had dialogue as its reiterated axis, straight out, with my accidental tribe. The dialogue has been protected in that which a distinguished Puerto Rican writer, Arcadio Díaz Quiñones, calls the continuity of a glance. That is, the unending observation, to the abyss of obsession, of my Puerto Rican country. The country that accompanies me everywhere. The country whose song, sweet or bitter, I want to inevitably sing.

The risks of the plan do not escape me. And sometimes I complain, of myself and to myself, for not having made a literature that is even more mine in me, more contaminated by the ruling of carnality and instinct, more subjected to the shifting laws of desire, more receptive to love like a submission that formulates its power on irrationality.

**Other notebooks of the native country**

Nevertheless, since the *En cuerpo de camisa* (In the body of a shirt) story collection was published, I have wanted to talk, now amorously, now furiously, about my country; I have wanted, little by little, to place it into text, go deeper into the possibilities of its physiognomy and of its typicality, combine some of its categorical features. Although without forgetting the truth that every country is configured on a plurality of temperaments and visions, of confronted stares and of indistinct bets to destiny's vicissitudes. Although without neglecting the truth that thousands of dreamed countries fit inside the moral geography of a country. Even in the countries whose governments represent, in non-stop showings, the comedy of equality by fighting tooth and nail, reality subverts the claims of a successful box office.

I repeat, I write to give the world news about my country. I do it because it has been in books where I have drunk the charm to fall in love, madly, with a particular place, with the people who live there and modify it, vitalize it, and spiritualize it.

For example, I loved Bahía before knowing it, a love induced by the sensual novels signed by Jorge Amado. With the same strength, I loved Madrid before I knew it, a love induced by the novels of the genius Pérez Galdós. Perhaps, more than Madrid, the streets that made their way in *La de Bringas*, *Fortunata y Jacinta*, *Miau*, novels by Torquemada; that Madrid of ancient streets and maculate walls.

Both, Jorge Amado and Benito Pérez Galdós, place the city at the center of the novel's conflict, in such a way that the characters' vicissitudes do not take place outside of the city. A Bahía that is more like Africa than America, presented by a Jorge Amado who promotes

magic. A gossipy and village-like Madrid, presented by a Benito Pérez Galdós perpetually attached to reality.

Early on, when my vocation was merely a mumbling of a young man from the Antonio Roig public housing project, in Humacao, oriental city in Puerto Rico, uninformed and badly educated, owner of a life that hardly knew where it was going, one of them gave me a formidable lesson. Beyond scenery, beyond the place of the action, beyond the historical campus, the city is the eye of personal storms. The other one, later on, when my writing vocation began to set its base, gave me another unforgettable lesson. All colors serve sensuality, even the local color which is made fun of; that local color which in the novels by Jorge Amado, because of his illustrious palette, rises to universal color, a first world color.

I also write to recuperate the distant experiences of the person whose presence on Earth is recognized by the Demographic Registry under two last names and two names: Luis Rafael Sánchez Ortiz, son of Luis Sánchez Cruz and Agueda Ortiz Tirado; bread baker the father, embroiderer at Josefina Reyes' bazaar the mother. When the family, which was complete with Elba Ivelisse Sánchez Ortiz and Néstor Manuel Sánchez Ortiz, moved to San Juan, when it risked its wealth of illusions on the muddy grounds of Puerto Nuevo and Caparra Terrace, my father became an insular policeman and my mother became an employee at a cheap shoe factory called Utrilón.

### **Those who live by the fruit of their hands and the rich**

When I take up the names of my parents, I take up the social class I come from. A social class that had its initial anchor in the government-subsidized public housing project, a class whose most legitimate certainty was poverty.

Then, not confusing affirmation with the reactionary sighs of nostalgia, Puerto Rico was poor in another way. Back then, school took care of training geared toward the diploma and the rest of the education was given at home. Three goals guided that home education, three goals that can be summarized in three repeated litanies, morning, afternoon, and evening. Because, precisely, a pedagogical value was attributed to repetition.

Poor but decent.

Poor but honest.

Poor but clean.

Poverty was accepted as a distant fact within politics, as an unchangeable event unless done through hard work. Poverty was confronted like an individual challenge. That is where the force of the adverse conjunction comes from. Decency, honesty, and cleanliness were elevated to moral signs or virtues to be displayed by the poor at all times and places; they were not subject to tolerance. There was no reason to expect the rich to be decent, honest, or clean because the rich had, among their countless luxuries, the ability to turn their backs to public opinion. That is what the rich were for to be and do what they felt like, when they felt like it, how they felt like it.

Those rigid codes educated the immense majority of the Puerto Rican country until the other day. Later, when poverty began to take over the values and resentment of the middle class, when old-style poverty was blurred by bank mortgages and the little loan to go skiing in Vermont and Colorado, when progress exploded in the country's face as if it was a bomb of devastating power, those rigid codes were no longer observed. To the sad extreme where unkempt poverty became another opportunistic costume of the small bourgeoisie: torn jeans were Levis brand, jeans ripped in the knees were Pepe brand. To the bitter extreme that poverty was treated like another one of the possibilities of esthetics.

## Colophon

Without it becoming dogmatic, one can subscribe to the old idea that in every literary work there's biography, that the person of the author pops out, main or secondary, ubiquitous or direct. Puerto Ricans have, as noticeable markers of our collective identity, sound, mixed race, and drift. Ours has been, with emphasis, a street culture, a culture of shouting and stridency. My work does not want to do anything else but write a biography of my country more than of myself. Not the placid that finds its deformity on the postcard that promotes it as a snake-less paradise. The other country interests me when I write literature. The chaotic, the one cut into pieces, the hostile one.

While I sharpen the closing lines, I realize that, in the end, I write to confirm life as a weaving of abrupt and unpleasant texts.

An illustrious bard, whose most pure poetry is transferred in the form of a bolero, claims in one of his most disseminated works, applause to pleasure and love. I also write for that. To applaud the great avenues of pleasure, to make way for the great illusions of love. Elías Cernetti, that great Bulgarian writer, said everything can be forgiven except not daring to be happy. I also write for that, to dare to be somewhat happy.