

ROOM FOR THE SHADOW

“No pen, no ink, no table, no room, no time, no quiet, no inclination.”

James Joyce, letter to his brother, 7 December 1906

I wasn't going to write. For years the temptation kept itself at bay, invisible. Books had the solid presence of the real world and filled my every possible need, whether read out loud to me at first, or later read silently on my own, but always repeating their assurance that what they told me would not change, unlike the rooms in which I slept and the voices heard outside the door. We travelled much, my nurse and I, because my father was in the Argentine diplomatic service, and the various hotel rooms, and even the embassy house in Tel-Aviv, lacked the familiarity of certain pages into which I slipped night after night.

After I learned to read, this storyland homecoming no longer depended on my nurse's availability or mood or weariness, but on my own whim alone, and I would return to the books I knew by heart whenever the fancy or the urge took me, following on the page the words recited in my head. In the morning, under one of four palm trees set in a square in the walled embassy garden; during the car drive to the large wild park where wild tortoises crept along the dunes planted with oleander bushes; especially at night, while my nurse, thinking I was asleep, sat at her electric knitting machine and, suffering from mysterious stomach pains that kept her agonizingly awake, worked until well past midnight. To the metronomic rasp of her machine, as she rolled the handle back and forth, in the dim yellow light that she kept on to work by, I would turn to the wall with my open book and read about an Aladdin-like hero called Kleine Muck, about the adventurous dog

Crusoe, about the robber bridegroom who drugged his victims with three-coloured wine, about Kay and Gerda and the wicked Ice Queen.

It never occurred to me that I might add something of my own to the books on my shelf. Everything I wanted was already there, at arm's reach, and I knew that, if I wished for a new story, the bookshop only a short walk away from the house had countless more to add to my stock. To invent a story, impossible as the task then seemed to me, would have felt like trying to build another palm tree for the garden or model another tortoise to struggle across the sand. What hope of success? Above all, what need?

We returned to Buenos Aires when I was seven, to a large, amiable house on a cobblestoned street, where I was given my own room perched on the back terrace, separate from the rest of the family. Until then, I had only spoken English and German. I learned to speak Spanish, and, gradually, Spanish books were added to my shelves. And still nothing prompted me to write.

Homework, of course, didn't count. "Compositions", as they were called, required one to fill a couple of pages on a given subject, keeping always closer to reportage than to fiction. Imagination wasn't called for. "Portrait of a Family Member", "What I Did on Sunday", "My Best Friend" elicited a sugary, polite prose, illustrated in colour pencils with an equally cordial depiction of the person or event concerned, the whole to be scrutinized by the teacher for accuracy and spelling mistakes. Only once did I diverge from the imposed subject. The title given to us was "A Sea Battle", the teacher no doubt imagining that his students, all boys, had the same enthusiasm for war games that he had. I never read the

books on airmen and soldiers that several of my schoolmates enjoyed, the “Biggles” series for instance, or the short histories of the World Wars, full of pictures of airplanes and tanks, printed on spongy, coarse paper. I realized that I completely lacked the requisite vocabulary for the task. I decided therefore to interpret the title differently, and wrote a description of a battle between a shark and a giant squid, no doubt inspired by an illustration from one of my favorite books, *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*. I was surprised to discover that my inventiveness, instead of amusing, angered the teacher who told me (quite rightly) that I knew very well that it was not what he had meant. I think that this was my first attempt at writing a story.

Ambition prompted my second stab at writing. Every year, just before the summer holidays, the school put on a vaguely patriotic play, exemplary and dull. I decided that I could write something at least not worse than these pedagogical dramas and, one evening after dinner, I sat down and composed a play about the childhood of one of our ancient presidents, famous, like Lincoln, for never having told a lie. The first scene opened with the boy facing the dilemma of denouncing a playmate or lying to his parents; the second portrayed him inventing a story to protect his friend; in the third, my hero suffered the pangs of a tormented conscience; in the fourth, his loyal friend confessed to the awful crime; the fifth showed our hero repenting from his lie, thus adroitly circumventing the real dilemma. The play bore a title that had the virtue of being, if not inspiring, at least clear: *Duty or Truth*. It was accepted and staged, and I experienced for the first time the thrill of having the words I had written read out loud by somebody else.

I was twelve at the time and the success of the experience prompted me to try and repeat it. I had written *Duty or Truth* in a few hours; in a few more hours I tried to write an imitation of *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* (inspired by Disney's *Fantasia*), a religious drama in which Buddha, Moses and Christ were the main protagonists, and an adaptation of "Falada, the Talking Horse", taken from the Brothers Grimm. I finished none of them. I realized that if reading is a contented, sensuous occupation whose intensity and rhythm are agreed upon between the reader and the chosen book, writing instead is a strict, plodding, physically demanding task in which the pleasures of inspiration are all well and good, but are only what hunger and taste are to a cook: a starting-point and a measuring-rod, not the main occupation. Long hours, stiff joints, sore feet, cramped hands, the heat or cold of the working-place, the anguish of missing ingredients and the humiliation due to the lack of know-how, onions that make you cry and sharp knives that slice your fingers, are what is in store for anyone who wants to prepare a good meal or write a good book. At twelve, I wasn't willing to give over even a couple of evenings to the writing of a piece. What for? I settled comfortably back into my role as reader.

Books continued to seduce me, and I loved anything that had to do with them. During my Buenos Aires adolescence, I was lucky enough to come across a number of well-known writers. First in an English-German bookstore where I worked between school hours, and later at a small publishing company where I apprenticed as an editor, I met Jorge Luis Borges, Adolfo Bioy Casares, Silvina Ocampo, Marta Lynch, Marco Denevi, Eduardo Mallea, José Bianco, and many others. I liked the company of writers and yet I felt very shy among them. I was, of course, almost invisible to them, but, from time to time, one would notice me and

ask: “Do you write?” My answer was always “No”. It was not that I didn’t wish, occasionally, to be like them and have my name on a book that other people would admire. It was simply that I was aware, very clearly, that nothing that I could produce would ever merit sitting on the same shelf as the books I loved. To imagine a book that I might write rubbing covers with a novel by Conrad or Kafka, was not only unthinkable but incongruous. Even an adolescent, in spite of all his overwhelming arrogance, has a sense of the ridiculous.

But I listened. I heard Bioy discuss the need to plot carefully the successive episodes in a story so as to know exactly where the characters are headed, and then cover the tracks, leaving only a few clues for the readers to think that they are discovering something invisible to the writer. I heard Silvina Ocampo explain why the tragedy of small things, of very ordinary people, was more moving than that of complex and powerful characters. I heard Marta Lynch speak passionately, enviously, of Chekhov, Denevi of Buzzati, Mallea of Sartre and Dostoevski. I heard Borges break down a Kipling story into its many parts and reassemble it, like a clockmaker inspecting a precious ancient instrument. I listened to these writers tell me how the stuff that I read had been made. It was like standing in a workshop and hearing the masters argue about the strongest materials, the best combinations, the tricks and devices by which something can be made to balance at a difficult angle or keep on ticking indefinitely, or about how something can be built to look impossibly slim and simple and yet hold a myriad complex springs and cogwheels. I listened not in order to learn a new craft but to better know my own.

In 1968, having decided not to follow a university career, I left for Europe and did desultory freelance work for a number of publishers. The

pay was abysmal and I seldom had enough money for more than a few meals a week. One day, I heard that an Argentine paper was offering a \$500 prize for the best short stories. I decided to apply. I quickly wrote, in Spanish, four stories that were readable, formally correct but utterly lifeless. I asked the Cuban novelist Severo Sarduy, whom I had met in Paris and who wrote in a rich, exuberant, baroque Spanish that resonated with literary allusions, to read them over for me. He told me they were awful. “You use words like an accountant,” he said. “You don’t ask words to perform for you. Here you have a character who falls and loses one of his contact lenses. You say that he lifts himself ‘half blind’ from the floor. Think harder. The word you want is ‘Cyclops’.” I obediently wrote ‘Cyclops’ in the story and sent the lot off. A few months later, I heard that I had won. I felt more embarrassed than proud, but was able to eat properly for a couple of months.

Still I wouldn’t write. I scribbled a few essays, a few poems, all atrocious. My heart wasn’t in it. Like someone who loves music and tries his hand at the piano, I undertook the experience less out of passion than out of curiosity, to see how it was done. Then I stopped. I worked for publishers, I selected manuscripts and saw them through the press, I imagined titles for other people’s books and put together anthologies of different kinds. Everything I did was always in my capacity as reader. “David was talented and knew how to compose psalms. And I? What am I capable of?” asked Rabbi Ouri in the eighteenth century. His answer was: “I can recite them.”

I published my first book in 1980. *The Dictionary of Imaginary Places* was the result of a collaboration with Gianni Guadalupi, whom I had met when we were both working for the same Italian publisher. The

idea for the book was Gianni's: a serious guide to fictional countries, for which we read over 2,000 books, with an energy that one only possesses when one is young. Writing the *Dictionary* was not what I would today call writing: it was more like summing up the books we read, detailing the geography, customs, history, flora and fauna of places such as Oz, Ruritania, Christianopolis. Gianni would send me his notes in Italian, I would translate them into English and recast them into a dictionary entry, always sticking to a Baedeker style. Because we use words for a vast number of things, writing is easily confused with other activities: recounting (as in our *Dictionary*), scribbling impressions, instructing, reporting, informing, chatting, dogmatizing, reviewing, sweet-talking, making pronouncements, advertising, proselytizing, preaching, cataloguing, informing, describing, briefing, taking notes. We perform these tasks with the help of words, but none of these, I'm certain, constitutes writing.

Two years later I arrived in Canada. On the strength of the *Dictionary*, I was asked to review books for newspapers, talk about books on the radio, translate books into English and adapt books into plays. I was perfectly content. Discussing books that had been familiar to my friends when I was young but were new to the Canadian reader, or reading for the first time Canadian classics that mysteriously mirrored others from far away and long ago, the library that I had begun when I was four or five kept growing nightly, ambitiously, relentlessly. Books had always grown around me. Now, in my house in Toronto, they covered every wall, they crowded every room. They kept growing. I had no intention of adding to their proliferation.

Instead, I practiced different forms of reading. The possibilities offered by books are legion. The solitary relationship of a reader with his book breaks into dozens of further relationships: with friends upon whom we urge the books we like, with booksellers (the few who have survived in the Age of Supermarkets) who suggest new titles, with strangers for whom we might compile an anthology. Reading and rereading over the years, these activities multiply and echo one another. A book we loved in our youth is suddenly recalled by someone to whom it was long ago recommended, the reissue of a book we thought forgotten makes it again new to our eyes, a story read in one context becomes a different story under a different cover. We never enter twice the same book.

Then, by chance, because of an unanswered question, my attitude towards writing changed. I've told the story before, elsewhere. A friend who had gone into exile during the military dictatorship in Argentina, revealed to me that one of my high school teachers, someone who had been essential in fostering my love of literature, had willingly denounced his students to the military police, knowing that they would be taken and tortured and sometimes killed. This was the teacher who had spoken to us of Kafka, of Ray Bradbury, of the murder of Polyxena (I can still hear his voice when I read the lines) in the medieval Spanish romance that begins:

*A la qu'el sol se ponía
en una playa desierta,
yo que salía de Troya
por una sangrienta puerta,
delante los pies de Pirro*

*vide a Polyxena muerta...*¹

After the revelation, I was left with the impossibility of deciding whether to deny the worth of his teaching or the evil of his actions, or to attempt to grasp the monstrous combination of both, alive in the same person. To give a shape to my question I wrote a novel, *News from a Foreign Country Came*.

From what I've heard, most writers know, from a very early age, that they will write. Something of themselves reflected in the outside world, in the way others see them, or the way they see themselves lending words to daily objects --to trees, skies, the eyes of a dog, the dim sunlight on a snowy morning--, something tells them they are writers, like something tells their friends that they are doctors or dentists. Something convinces them that they are chosen for this particular task and that, when they grow up, their name will be stamped on the cover of a book, like a pilgrim's badge. I think something told me I was to be a reader. The encounter with my exiled friend happened in 1988; it was therefore not till I turned forty that the notion of becoming a writer appeared to me as possible. Forty is a time of change, of retrieving from ancient cupboards whatever it is we left behind, packed away in the dark, and of reconsidering its latent forces.

My intention was clear. That the result wasn't successful doesn't change the nature of my purpose. Now I wanted to write. I wanted to write a novel. I wanted to write a novel that would put into words –

¹ “At the hour of the setting sun/ On a deserted beach/ I, leaving Troy/ Through a bloodied door/ At Pyrrhus' feet/ Saw Polyxena lying dead.” Polyxena, daughter of Hecuba and Priam, was sacrificed by Achilles' son Neoptolemus (also known as Pyrrhus) to appease his father's ghost.

literary words, words like the ones that made up the books on my shelves, incandescent words—what seemed to me impossible to be spoken. I tried. In between my bread-and-butter jobs, early in the mornings or late at night, in hotel rooms and in cafés when an assignment forced me to travel, I cobbled together the story of a man of two natures, or of a single divided nature. *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, read during one terrified night when I was thirteen, was never far from my thoughts. I felt desperate for a long chunk of time to work continuously on my novel, so as not to lose the pace, the sequence, the logic and the rhythm. I convinced myself that I could recapture the thread after days or weeks of interruption. I pretended that the lack of concentration didn't matter and that I'd be able to pick up where I'd left off, just as I'd pick up a story I was reading at the place where I'd left my bookmark. I was wrong, but lack of uninterrupted time was not the only reason for my failure. The lessons from the masters during my adolescence seemed to be now of no avail. A few scenes worked. The novel didn't.

There was a lack of craft. Readers can tell when a sentence works or doesn't, when it breathes and rises and falls to the beat of its own sense, or when it stands stiff as if embalmed. Readers who turn to writing can recognize this too, but they can never explain it. The most a writer can do is learn the rules of grammar and spelling, and the business of reading. Beyond this, whatever excellence he may achieve will be the result of simply doing what he's trying to learn, learning to write by writing, in a beautiful vicious circle that illuminates (or can illuminate) itself at each new turn. "There are three rules for writing a good book," said Somerset Maugham. "Unfortunately, no one knows what they are."

Experience of life everyone has; the knack for transforming it into *literary* experience is what we lack. And even if one were granted that alchemical talent, what experience is a writer allowed to use in trying to tell a story? The death of her mother, like the narrator in Alice Munro's "Material"? His guilty desire, as in Thomas Mann's "Death in Venice"? The blood of a loved one, like the master who sees his disciple beheaded and thinks how beautiful the scarlet colour is on the green floor, in Marguerite Yourcenar's "How Wang Fo Was Saved"? Is he entitled to use even the intimate life of his family, his friends, of those who trusted in him and might be horrified to find themselves speaking private words in front of a reading public? When Marian Engel, in the company of other authors, heard of something that appealed to her, however confidential, she'd shout out "Called it!", claiming for her writing the juicy tidbit. Apparently, in the realm of writing, there are no moral restrictions on hunting and gathering.

I too, tried to work from experience, seeking there moments and events to furnish the thing I was calling up from the shadows. I chose for my main character the face of a man I had once seen in the paper, a gentle, knowledgeable, kindly face which I later discovered belonged to Claus Barbie. That misleading face suited my character perfectly as did the name, Berence, a name I borrowed from a strange gentleman I met on the ship from Buenos Aires to Europe, a writer who was in the habit of travelling back and forth across the Atlantic, never spending time in the port of destination, and who one night, when I was suffering from a bad cold and a high fever, told me the story of Lafcadio who commits the gratuitous act of pushing the unworldly Amédée off a moving train, in Gide's *Les Caves du Vatican*. I depicted Algiers according to my memories of Buenos Aires (another pseudo-French city on the sea), and

Northern Quebec according to my memories of a visit to Percé. In order to bring the story to its close, I needed to describe the workings of a torturer, but not the torture itself. I imagined someone applying the brutal methods not to a person but to something inert, lifeless. My unattended fridge contained an old celery stalk. I imagined what it would be like to torture it. The scene, mysteriously, turned out to be exactly right. But I still had to give words to the torturer's self-justification. I didn't know how to do it. "You have to bring yourself to think like him," my friend Susan Swan advised. I didn't think I was capable. Humiliatingly, I realized that I could think the torturer's thoughts.

But in spite of a few successful moments, the writing grated, stumbled, fell flat. Attempting to say that a man enters a room, or that the light in the garden has changed, or that the child felt that she was being threatened, or any simple, precise thing that we communicate (or believe we communicate) every moment of every day, is, I discovered, one of the most difficult of literary endeavours. We believe the task is easy because our listener, or our reader, carries the epistemological weight and is supposed to intuit our message, to know what we mean. But in fact, the signs that stand for the sounds that spark the thoughts that conjure up the memory that dredges up the experience that calls upon the emotion, crumble under the weight of all they must carry and barely, hardly ever, serve the purpose for which they were designed. When they do, the reader knows the writer has succeeded, and is grateful for the miracle.

Chesterton observes in one of his essays that "Somewhere embedded in every ordinary book are the five or six words for which really all the rest will be written." I think every reader can find them in the books he loves; I'm not certain that every writer can. As to my novel,

I have a vague notion of what those words might be, and now (so many years after the fact) I feel that they would have sufficed, if they had come to me then, at the beginning.

The book was not what I had imagined, but now I too was a writer. Now I too was in the hands (in a very literal sense) of readers who had no proof of my existence except my book, and who judged me, cared for me, or, more likely, dismissed me without any consideration for anything else I could offer beyond the strict limits of the page. Who I was, who I had been, what my opinions were, what my intentions, how deep my knowledge of the subject, how heartfelt my concern for its central question, was immaterial to them. Like the Gnat in *Through the Looking-Glass*, always telling Alice that “you might make a joke on that”, the writer wishes to tell the reader “you might laugh at the absurdity of this passage” or “you might weep over this scene” but, like Alice, the reader is bound to answer: “If you’re so anxious to have a joke made, why don’t you make one yourself?” Whatever I had not managed to convey in my novel wasn’t there, and no self-respecting reader would supply the jokes and sorrows that I had left out. In this sense, I’m always puzzled by the generosity with which certain readers agree to mend the deficiencies of dismal writers; perhaps a book has to be not just mediocre but outright bad to elicit a reader’s Samaritan response.

I don’t know what --from the mass of advice given to me by the masters, of the books that set examples, of the exemplary events I witnessed and cautionary gossip heard throughout my life-- was responsible for my few successful pages. The process of learning to write is heartbreaking because it is unaccountable. No amount of hard work, splendid purpose, good council, impeccable research, harrowing

experiences, knowledge of the classics, ear for music and taste for style, guarantee good writing. Something, driven by what the ancients called the Muse and we bashfully call inspiration, chooses and combines, snips, stitches and mends a coat of words to clothe whatever it is stirs in our depths, ineffable and immaterial, a shadow. Sometimes, for reasons that never become clear, everything fits: the shape is right, the point of view is right, the tone and colouring are right and, for the space of a line or a paragraph, the shadow can be seen fully fledged in all its awful mystery, not translated into anything else, not in service of an idea or an emotion, not even as part of a story or an essay, but as sheer epiphany: writing that is, as the old metaphor has it, exactly equivalent to the world.

During the first half of the eighteenth century, it was customary in France for theatregoers, if they were rich, to pay for seats not in the orchestra or the boxes, but directly onstage, a practice so popular that often this intrusive public outnumbered the cast. During the première of Voltaire's play *Sémiramis*, there were so many spectators onstage, that the actor playing King Ninus's ghost stumbled and nearly fell, thus spoiling a key dramatic scene. Among the ensuing peals of laughter, Voltaire is said to have stood up and cried out: "*Place à l'ombre!*" "Make room for the shadow!"

The anecdote is useful. Like the stage, the writing life is made up of carefully balanced artifice, exact inspirational lighting, right timing, precise music, and the secret combination of craft and experience. For reasons of chance, money, prestige, friendship and family duties, the writer allows onto the stage, to sit in on the performance, a crowd of intruders who then become involuntary participants, taking up space, spoiling a good effect, tripping the actors, and who eventually turn into

excuses, reasons for failure, honourable distractions and justifiable temptations. Success in writing (I mean, writing something good) depends on tiny, brittle things, and while it is true that genius can override all obstacles --Kafka wrote masterpieces in a corridor of his father's hostile house and Cervantes dreamt up his *Quixote* in prison—mere talent requires less crowded, less constrained mental settings than those that most writers usually enjoy. The shadow needs room. And even then, nothing is promised.

For the time being, the reader I am judges the writer I chose to become with amused tolerance, as he invents strategies for his new craft. The shadow flitting in the gloom is infinitely powerful and fragile, and immensely alluring, and beckons (I think it beckons) to me as I cross from one side of the page to the other.