

THE LANCASTER INTERNATIONAL FICTION

LECTURE

Fiction as the News

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I

The year Pablo Escobar was killed was the year I realised I would become a writer. Escobar was, of course, the head of the drug cartel whose war against the Colombian state had shaped my teenage years, beginning with the murder of a minister of Justice in 1984 – I was eleven then – and continuing during the following decade with a kind of terrorism that we had never known before: bombing, for instance, a shopping mall on Mother’s Day, a commercial airplane with more than a hundred passengers and even the well-protected building that housed the national intelligence agency. Escobar wanted to pressure the government into rejecting extradition laws that would have sent drug dealers to American jails; he dreamed of negotiations such as the ones that had ended with amnesty laws for guerrilla members in the previous years. His best strategy, he thought, was generalised fear. The extent of his determination is evident in an

undercover recording of his voice taped while he was in hiding.

‘We have to create real fucking chaos so they’ll call us to peace talks,’ he says. ‘If we take it to the politicians, burn down their houses and make a real bloody civil war, then they’ll have to call us to peace talks and our problems will be fixed.’

Like most Colombians, I had several close encounters with ‘chaos’ during those years. One of them has a special meaning for me, so much so that I have given it narrative form in a novel called *The Shape of the Ruins*. On 30 January 1993, I was walking towards a place that had become for me a retreat, an asylum of sorts. The building occupied a whole block in downtown Bogotá; it was built like a warehouse, with brick walls and no windows, and its three stories held dozens of small cubicles where, it seemed to me, you could find a second-hand copy of every book ever published in the Spanish-speaking world. As a disenchanted Law student, slowly coming to terms with the place that fiction had taken up in my life, I used to flee the classroom at the slightest opportunity – between, shall we say, Administrative Law and Equity and Trusts – and spend some time browsing, often losing track of time and missing Equity and Trusts, and

collecting cheap editions of Latin American fiction like a man gathering tinned food for a long period of isolation.

That day I had one title in mind: *Último round*, two volumes of miscellanea by Julio Cortázar, an Argentinian writer whose novel *Hopscotch* I had read the previous year with feelings of jealousy and frustration. *Hopscotch* followed the lives and conversations of a group of friends and lovers in Paris, and its world of books and jazz and existential doubts could not have felt more seductive for the young man I was, because it was conspicuously *not* my own world of senseless violence, of constant threat, of TV ads that offered unreasonable rewards for information leading to the capture of a mafia lord, or asked Colombian parents, in block capitals, white out of black, this ominous question:

DO YOU KNOW
WHERE YOUR CHILDREN
ARE RIGHT NOW?

A friend of mine, a reader older than me and thus more knowledgeable, had told me that *Último round* included a particular essay about what he called, rather pompously, the art of the short story. ‘You can’t write short stories if you haven’t read “On the Short Story and Its Environs”,’ he

announced. So there I was, hunting for that magical book in the place I knew best. But before visiting my windowless warehouse, I decided to try my luck at a nearby stationery shop that used also to have a small selection of books and had often surprised me with unexpected treasures; reaching the shop window, however, seeing that the place had been invaded by small, noisy children and nervous mothers buying supplies for the beginning of the school year, I decided to walk on. I had turned the corner and was approaching the entrance to my warehouse when the bomb went off. In the news, late that night, I learned that the attack had probably targeted the Chamber of Commerce, that it had left twenty-five dead, and that among the victims was a couple and their two children, seven and four years old, who had been buying stationery for the new school term.

The narrator of *The Shape of the Ruins* remembers these words, attributed to Napoleon: ‘To understand the man, you have to understand what was happening in the world when he was twenty.’ I was twenty years and thirty days old when that bomb went off in downtown Bogotá, leaving me to face the uncomfortable fact that, with a small adjustment of time or place, I could have been one of the dead. A friend of mine used to say that if a book matters to us, we may not recall the exact details of its plot or its characters, but we will always

remember what we were doing when we read it; conversely, I've always thought that fiction readers, when remembering an important event, tend to recall, almost involuntarily, the book they were reading at the time. The day of the bombing I was reading *Seven Nights*, a series of lectures on literature by Jorge Luis Borges. In my copy I underlined these words: 'There is no chance ... What we call chance is our ignorance of the complex machinery of causality.' But I don't think I had the bomb in mind when I chose them.

I finished my Borges in February and I read *Aura*, by Carlos Fuentes, in March. I read *The Alexandria Quartet* between April and May and *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* in June. Because I've always written down the date I finish on the last page of every book I read, I can state for a fact that I was twenty years and seven months when I read *Memoirs of Hadrian*, by Marguerite Yourcenar, in Julio Cortázar's translation; I was twenty years and nine months old when I read Aldous Huxley's *Eyeless in Gaza*, and twenty years and eleven months when, just weeks after Pablo Escobar was gunned down on the rooftops of Medellín, I finished Richard Ellmann's biography of James Joyce, reading the last lines aloud as if they were a prayer susceptible of being answered. Ellmann is talking about Joyce's two areas of interest, his family and his writing. 'These passions never

dwindled,' he says. 'The intensity of the first gave his work its sympathy and humanity; the intensity of the second raised his life to dignity and high dedication.'

To return to Napoleon's dictum: that was my world – the world of my twentieth year. On one side, the unpredictable violence that shaped our lives in the theatre of an irregular war; on the other, the invisible revolutions that involved only me, as I began to accept that this, the possibility of a life spent reading and writing fiction, was replacing every other ambition I'd once had.

II

Over the years, I've slowly come to the realisation that the two phenomena did not occur in separate universes. The novels I read in those days were, it seems to me now, a kind of antidote against the degradation of my society. While terrorism transformed individual lives in devious ways, including the lives of those who did not experience it in the flesh but felt its indirect consequences, the novels I was reading, although incapable of solving anything, seemed to respond with a certain private order to the public chaos. They preserved a certain notion of the human – indeed, the humane – amid actors and circumstances that seemed bent on reducing, even

obliterating it. A novel was a place of silence where I could rest from the deafening noise surrounding us all; a place where I could live for a sustained time in the company of a consciousness more penetrating than my own; a promise of a richer, fuller life.

As terrorism forced us to live indoors, where risks were reduced, a feeling that I can only call claustrophobia began contaminating my days. The fictions I read alleviated that sense of oppression, mainly by pointing at the common human factors between myself and all those men and women dealing – in faraway places and in their own languages – with preoccupations I could understand. I looked for fictions that could speak to me across cultural contrasts; I'm not exaggerating when I say that I felt myself better understood by Stephen Dedalus than by the newspapers I read every day. When today I discuss the internationality of fiction, I'm really remembering this: its mysterious ability to read me, to interpret me, across time and space.

This, I believe, is fiction's claim to being an international art form: its ability to liberate us from our frustratingly limited perspectives on life. The fictions I read lived in conversation with other fictions: García Márquez introduced me to Virginia Woolf and Vargas Llosa introduced me to Flaubert. With each one of those new acquaintances, my

sense of reality seemed to enlarge. In a book of interviews – which, according to the last page, I read in December 1993 – Adolfo Bioy Casares is asked whether to write is, in a certain way, to stop living. He answers:

It seems to me that the opposite is true. I dare to give the advice to write, because writing is adding a room to the house of life. There is life and there is thinking about life, which is another way of going through it intensely.

But there were other, more complex emotions. A novel was also a place of solitude where I could recover from the hostility, the sheer anger of my city; a place of quiet nonconformity and careful rebellion, a rejection of the flawed world outside, a silent protest that was not altogether free of resentment. In García Márquez's *The General in His Labyrinth*, Simón Bolívar has this to say about what I was feeling, perhaps unfairly: 'Every Colombian is an enemy country.' The violence outside invaded and contaminated our private lives. I've written a short story about this – it's called 'The Boys' and appears in my collection *Songs for the Flames* – in which middle-class teenagers meet to fight for fun, unable to recognise or understand the deep pleasure they take in

making somebody else cry or bleed. This is the degradation I was talking about. We were all broken, each one of us, living in a broken society. In a mysterious way, the activity of reading fiction, even if it never quite mended those fractures, opened a space that I could use to better cope with them.

Twenty-eight years have passed since then. I have published a little under 3,000 pages of novels and short stories; also, two books of literary essays and hundreds of reviews that strive to understand what fiction is, what it does. I have changed in these twenty-eight years, and the books I love have changed, and my relationship with fiction has changed too. In one obviously important way, my twenty-year-old self was (quite unconsciously, truth be told) using fiction to deal with a hostile reality; today I consciously use fiction to investigate that reality, whose hostility has also changed but never disappeared. Rather than protecting myself from it, I use the novels I read, but also those I write, to go towards it – towards its areas of darkness, its uncharted territories – and try to come back with some kind of illumination, or, to use a humbler word, information. We may as well call it *the news*. I have forgotten where I encountered for the first time those lines of William Carlos Williams that many writers before me have brought to court to speak as witnesses in defence of literature:

My heart rouses
Thinking to bring you news
Of something
That concerns you
And concerns many men. Look at
What passes for the new.
You will not find it there but in
Despised poems.
It is difficult
To get the news from poems
Yet men die miserably every day
For lack
Of what is found there.¹

With a few exceptions like Spanish and English – my language and yours – most of Europe refers to long works of prose fiction with a word derived from *romanice*, which in medieval Latin means ‘natural language’ or ‘common tongue’, as opposed to written Latin, the language of scholars and elites. This little etymological insight pleases me, I must confess, because it reflects the democratic impulse that to me is inseparable from the genre: this genre born, in its modern incarnation, when an anonymous Spanish writer thought that

¹ Lines from ‘Asphodel, That Greeny Flower’ by William Carlos Williams reprinted courtesy of Carcanet Press.

the life of a poor outcast, a *pícaro* called Lazarillo de Tormes, was worthy of our curiosity and our sustained attention. But our beautiful word *novel*, coming from the Italian or the Old French for ‘news’, feels to me deeply satisfying. With its suggestion of messengers reaching us from undiscovered countries – yes, areas of darkness and uncharted territories – with the implicit embracing of everyday reality, the reality one would see in the papers, the novel carries the promise of bringing us *something that concerns us and concerns many men*.

What this *something* is, the nature of this news, has always been difficult to define. It is obviously not the kind of information we look for in journalism or history, precious as that is; it is not quantifiable information, or information that can be confirmed empirically. Fiction, James Wood writes, is ‘a ceaseless experiment with uncollectable data’, and many of the misunderstandings surrounding it arise from the expectation that the data contained there are, in fact, collectable. Of course, any attentive reader will close Dostoyevsky’s *The Gambler* knowing more than before about casinos, and they will probably learn with Nabokov’s *The Defence* many a thing they didn’t know about chess. But if that’s all they get, or all they were after in the first place, to say that they would be missing the point is perhaps an

understatement. Borges called one of his great short stories ‘an ethics for immortals’, but I expect few readers will approach it with the intention of applying its lessons in the future.

The novel we call historical has often been the victim of this kind of misunderstanding. Of course, every reader of *Wolf Hall* will learn a great deal about the court of Henry VIII, and I can only be glad they do, just as every reader of Mario Vargas Llosa’s *The War of the End of the World* will gather interesting facts about the Canudos revolution in nineteenth-century Brazil. But I dare say both Vargas Llosa and Hilary Mantel pursue a double goal in their fiction: to be as accurate as history, yes, but also *to tell us something that history doesn’t*. Great non-fiction, of which I have consumed plenty, seems to me irreplaceable as a source of a certain kind of information. What would be the point of using fiction to give readers more of the same? The novel’s sole *raison d’être*, says the Austrian novelist Hermann Broch, is to say what only the novel can say. And what is true about the past, as explored in the best works of the historical genre, is true of the present as well. The news we receive from the novels of Javier Marías or Ali Smith is not to be found anywhere else. Carlos Fuentes used to ask, ‘What is imagination but the transformation of experience into knowledge?’ Yes: fiction is knowledge. Admittedly, it is an ambiguous and ironic kind of knowledge, but one without

which our understanding of the world would be incomplete, fragmentary, or even severely flawed.

This is what fiction has to offer. But the real question is: What do we want from fiction?

III

This question has taken a new meaning for me in the last few months, as we grapple with the uncertainties of the pandemic. I caught the virus at the end of February 2020, so early in the game that the tests in my country were not able to diagnose it correctly; for a few months, after overcoming a severe pneumonia and recovering with no serious consequences, I was convinced I'd had a different virus, although every new symptom confirmed by the media turned out to have been present in my case. Today, the uncertainty that I felt back then has yielded to our general uncertainty, the collective difficulty to know just how all this should be dealt with. It seems to me when I look out of my digital windows (through which virtually no place in the world escapes our gaze) that the pandemic has deadened our ability to imagine others – their anxiety, their pain, their fear – and exhausted our strategies to deal with our own fear, our own pain, our own anxiety.

In those moments, hundreds or maybe thousands of us have reached for Albert Camus's *The Plague*, or Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year*, or even García Márquez's *Love in the Time of the Cholera*. What I find stubbornly fascinating about this attitude is the fact that there is something religious in it (believers looking for answers in a Book) and at the same time deeply practical and almost materialistic: novels as 'interpreters of maladies', if I may borrow for a second Jhumpa Lahiri's beautiful title; or, to put it differently, fiction as a *vade mecum*. The words, as you will know, mean 'Go with me'. That's what I ask of the best fictions: that they walk with me, interpreting the world as we move forward, telling me the news.