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A Brief Speech

As a child, I cherished what I did not understand, the unexplained, that precious stone that glittered among the trivial gangue of the obvious and well known. I wasn't the only one. There's an instinct that draws children to the unexplainable; I suppose it's part of their developmental process. Perhaps kids today have too many things explained to them; they're encouraged to understand everything and given the tools to answer their questions instantly. This attitude might be part of society's developmental process, a way to impede the proliferation of unproductive dreamers. These safeguards hadn't yet arisen in the time and place where I spent my early years: a village of country people who had never considered the idea of stimulating their children's knowledge beyond sending them to school and leaving them to figure the rest out for themselves. I can say that they left me in peace to chase my mysteries, which were far from transcendental. My-sized mysteries, which I didn't share with anyone for fear they'd be demystified and lose their delicious darkness. I remember a soap ad in a magazine that claimed to be the brand used by nine out of ten Hollywood starlets. I was horrified by the cruelty of the writers of that ad, singling out that poor woman, number ten, denouncing her so publically and so underhandedly. It's true that they didn't give her name, but the other nine harpies surely knew who she was, along with the rest of the merciless Hollywood gossip circuit. At the movie theater, I tried to guess which actress it might be, I tried to look beyond the characters to detect any traces of rebelliousness in their true personalities. I searched for her among the secondary actresses, and even among the extras: the discrimination she surely endured thanks to that damned soap made it unlikely she'd be given starring roles. But I soon stopped feeling sorry for her. My reasoning was this: if she had the nerve to hold out against the soap brand that everyone else used, she would surely be able to hold out against the malice directed toward her for having the courage to be different. I identified with her, that unknown and

nameless Amazon rebel. I thought I was different too. Surrounded by kids who desperately searched for certainties, I hunted for the enigmas that had no answers; I was a connoisseur of the unknown. Much later, I found out that I wasn't all that original. I read somewhere that one of my childhood heroes, John Cage, in his youth, valued only what he didn't understand and he disregarded what he did understand as banalities unworthy of an intelligent child. I wasn't that radical, because I quickly realized that I found mystery in what I had close at hand, within view and understanding. My investigations led me to books, and reading became my favorite pastime, ever since then and forever, up to today. Reading was and still is unfaltering in its ability to allow exploration of other worlds, but it was also inhabited by nostalgia. Because dedicated reading inevitably converted me into that banal figure that is the Cultured Man, the man with the answers, always at risk of becoming a tiresome know-it-all. Books resolved the questions that I would've preferred left in suspense and darkness: enigmas progressively became clearer; that's happened to a lot of people too. I remember a poet talking about the sadness she felt when the word "cartilage" stopped being what she'd thought it was throughout her entire childhood: a knight in steel armor with an unsheathed sword standing atop a cliff, and thanks to her increased information it was transformed into the common tissue found in the body of humans and animals. I was a duplicitous reader, and I wonder if all readers might be duplicitous, if the disassociation between worlds that reading implies might be normal. But my duplicity was particular: on one hand I sought, like a hermit, distance from the world so that I could create new perplexities: the surrealists, the Gongorists, the obscure philosophers who were to my ears like the dissonant murmur of the language of birds. I didn't even back away from books in languages I knew little or not at all, just to experience that delicious shiver of incomprehension. But there was another aspect, in which the distant found itself bordered by the near or adjoining, the massive identification with the human, too human, of the old realism. Novels about pirates, musketeers, and treasure hunters led to Zola, Dickens. There I found another level of mystery, refined, transfigured, which transfigured the real. Balzac was more mysterious than Mallarmé, because he allowed me to turn the mystery to myself, to my desires and ambitions and fears. The darkness hid within the light, it had to be extracted from the everyday facts, like a

misunderstanding. That's why when reading crystallized into writing there was also a duplicity, unavoidable. The esoteric vanguard I'd aspired to hearing *Pierrot Lunaire* or Cecil Taylor stalled halfway, entrenched in the old, which is what is read, while the new is there to be written. I conserved the old out of loyalty to reading. Loyalty and gratitude, because some of us have reading to thank for a lot, or for almost everything. One of my favorite quotes is a phrase by Fontenelle, "There is no sorrow that cannot be forgotten after an hour of reading." In reality sorrow's not even a requirement to experience the comforting power of reading. But that hour of comfort doesn't come free and naturally, upon merely opening a book. It takes long practice to be able to bring it from very far, from the first readings when we thought it was a miracle, to create the new miracle of a truce in the process of problem solving and pursuit of objectives that makes up adult life. I think Fontenelle was referring to hedonistic reading with no objective, what all good readers boast of practicing, but they lie. Reading for pleasure means obeying the laws of pleasure, the first of which, and the only, is the law of freedom. Freedom from the restrictions imposed on reading, from its uses: to instruct, to inform, to refine taste, to stimulate reflection. The pleasure of reading can do without all that, in a happy nihilism. But from nihilism there's no turning back, and when pleasure is given free reign it can take you down unexpected paths. One could do such a blasphemous thing as tire of Shakespeare, Kafka, or Henry James, and start reading detective novels. Such a thing is less infrequent than it's admitted (I assure you). It would make sense that the chosen reading in that case would be the detective novel. The person who's spent their life reading the classics, ancient and modern, has lived under the shadow of rereading, implicit, whether it's done or not, in all good literature. There's a duplicity of time in reading, the need for a second point by which to establish the perspective and assign value to the work. The detective novel by nature cannot be reread, it's its own spoiler, and the reader is freed from that temporal duplicity that constitutes the classics. But the assignment of value, even without the perspective that can be gained through rereading, is inevitable. We demand quality from the least ambitious reading; in fact, we demand even more, because it doesn't come certified beforehand. Being an aficionado of detective novels, and thankful as I am of the dense escape they allow me, I judge them harshly. I find Agatha Christie tiresome, I admire Margery Allingham without

reservation but at times I lament that she forces the moralist note. And Dorothy Parker creates a conflict of loyalty: I don't understand why Borges never tired of badmouthing her. Edmund Crispin doesn't try hard enough; John Dickson Carr tries too hard. Simenon falls in the category of genius but he has the defect of not being the alter ego of an Oxford professor. And when I like something too much, as has recently happened with Lee Child, I have to ask myself seriously: is it really as good as it seems to me? Judgement should be instantaneous and decided on the spot with the same suspense and brusque resolution offered by the text. In any event, the assignment of literary value is inevitable. Even lost in the absorbing labyrinths of a crime, when the only thing that matters to me is knowing which of the suspects will end up being the murderer, I still care if it's good literature or not. It seems hypocritical to demand literary quality of books read purely for pleasure, after one has overcome cultural pretensions, but nonetheless it's impossible not to demand it. Books are never just books: they're always good or bad, or something within that huge intermediate expanse. Literature, no matter the genre or format, is there to be judged. Quality is not another color to be painted on once all the elements are in place, but one of the building blocks, the text's true plot, hidden below the apparent one. More than a building block, I'd call it a generative force; if there's no promise of excellence it's not even worth starting. This leads me to think that quality is something expected from literature; in reality, it couldn't be any other way since it's an activity with no function that can justify it to society; it must be good in order to exist, it must have the elements needed to be good from the outset. I have a theory on the matter, which I don't think anyone will agree with, but I've given up hoping for agreement. I got the idea from an old book by an Argentinian psychoanalyst, Isabel Luzuriaga, who proposes that intelligence can act against itself and sabotage itself from the inside. The author was a specialist in children with learning disabilities, and she'd noticed a paradoxical situation in her small patients. The cognitive apparatus in children is prepared and predisposed to absorb knowledge; this happens naturally, biologically you could say. Children learn without having to make a special effort; it's difficult for them to reject knowledge transmitted to them. Therefore the child that doesn't learn must be making a special effort not to incorporate knowledge, utilizing an intelligence superior to that of the child who learns, in order to obstruct what his mental and physical

constitution irresistibly offers him. The reasons behind this may lie in the traumas or inhibitions that psychoanalysts study and these are open for debate, but the mechanism itself seems plausible. So much so that it could be transferred to other fields and the field of literature is fertile ground for these kinds of transfers. It could be said that the writer is naturally predestined to write well, because their profession, literature, requires quality in order to exist; literature serves no purpose beyond the pleasure it produces, and this pleasure is associated with the level of quality that the reader assigns it, as the author will have done before. Then writers, without making any special effort, letting themselves naturally follow their initial impulse, will write well. They will create something good if they just give themselves over to literature, to the survival mechanisms that literature has developed to keep itself from going extinct in a world that doesn't need it. In a world where everything must fulfill some purpose, literature, aware of its uselessness, knows that its only chance of surviving is in producing pleasure and admiration. Therefore it's worked out a mechanism to ensure that everyone who practices it does it well. To write badly on the other hand, the writer must enter into the mechanism of writing and figure out how to work against it, which requires great cleverness and a heroic effort. But knowing writers' characteristic laziness, their psychology of the least effort, they will most likely follow their natural tendency and they will write well. That's the reason there are so few bad writers and they stick out so much when they appear, although these rare swans appear so infrequently, because they are masters of hiding. This is not meant to praise, even sarcastically, the bad writer. But I would at least defend the bad writer, since, as with the Hollywood starlets of my youth, nine out of ten writers employ good literature, and well-written books flood the bookstores to such an extent that it strips one of all desire to read. The ease of writing well produces a despondency that we try to combat in many ways. Of course, no one wants to write badly; that's frowned upon, and it would also require a superhuman force, and it doesn't pay well. The other way, which is more widely accepted, is to simply write "better." That's what we writers aim to do in the end, and with this aim we introduce the factor of Time into our work. We resolve the stalemate between good and bad using our experience and training. In this way we fulfill the classic duality of Life and Work. The dilemma of Life and Work was summed up by Felisberto Hernández, with his

melancholic Uruguayan humor, in a phrase that has haunted me for years: "I write better and better," he said, "it's a shame I'm getting worse and worse." The first part is purely programmatic, the second, soberly realist. It's difficult for writers to be objective about their own work, since the judgement can't be made without using the very instrument used in writing. But it's logical to assume that writers get better with time, seeing as it's an activity practiced over a lifetime and it would be difficult not to improve. The writer can learn from anything, because literature can take advantage of the slightest accident of experience, and even accidents we don't experience. And, what's most important, the knowledge gained will be useful to writing as long as there's still time to write something else. We also learn in Life, where we do almost nothing besides learn, but in Life knowledge isn't as useful because the time when we could've put it into practice, youth, is already behind us. The objectivity that so rarely allows the writer to evaluate their own work comes served on a silver platter when they have to evaluate their life. Felisberto had reasons to justify the two clauses of his affirmation. His long and slow training as a writer culminated in his death and an incomplete masterpiece. Additionally, his life as a street musician, his poverty, his neurasthenia, and his five wives explain why he said what he did. And there's also a causal relationship between the two statements, because one of the things that makes your life worse, even for those of us who aren't street musicians and who haven't had five wives, is the effort to write better, which casts a shadow of dissatisfaction, doubt, and fear of having chosen the wrong path over our lives. Why do we torture ourselves this way? Why don't we just content ourselves with the simple Good Writing that comes so naturally? Readers would be willing to accept whatever comes more easily. Not only would they accept it but they'd value it even more highly, because it would fit the mold of what's expected and conventional, which is what they want to read, not the stranger and stranger texts born from the intensified search for the Best. When it comes to the critics, they'd most likely be annoyed that we've made their work more complicated. Who sent us off to try and write better? Why don't we just write normal everyday novels, like everyone else? We have the whole world against us but we still persist in this task that becomes increasingly difficult and further complicates our lives. I think there's a reason we do such an unjustifiably masochistic thing. Life gradually worsens, the traps that it sets out

for us become more and more elaborate, and so we need more elaborate abilities and new abilities, more sharply honed, in order to spot these traps. It's an ever-worsening predicament that creates a vicious cycle. Life worsens to such an extent that we have to do more and more to redeem it in our Work. And the better we write, the worse our Life gets, because Work causes us to lose more and more opportunities for happiness and the Best will never outpace the Worst, like in the race between Achilles and the Tortoise. Time is the backdrop against which this comedy is played out. It shouldn't come as a surprise that time, despite being the most depressing of mental categories, is at the center of the writer's interest. Our job, which doesn't require capital or physical labor, is time-intensive, not only because of the time it takes to write but also because one way or another time ends up being the issue dealt with. To deny it would be in vain: its triumph is assured in advance because any battle fought against it will be fought within it. When Borges attempted his Refutation of Time, he gave it up as hopeless from the start, from the title, upon classifying it as New. And not everyone, or better said almost no one, has Proust's talent for handling time, which he wasted in life as an idle snob only to recover it in his work, intact and unused, pristine like a quality diamond that reflected all the colors and aromas of an era in which everything was still unknown and the world was a treasure trove of enigmas. When the protagonist of his book innocently offends a countess upon telling her that her house is as lovely as an old train station, he didn't know, as a child can't know, that the comparison he was making was inadequate, and that nothing could please a countess less than her house evoking an old provincial station. But he was leaving behind a trail for when he was old enough to know, the way children leave behind a trail of pebbles in the forest to show themselves the way out. He was marking the way back in time so that he could get there when he needed to write about it, no matter how far that train may have taken him into the night. Opposed to Proust's strategy with time, Dr. Johnson wrote in his youth and stopped doing it when he began to receive his pension from the king. He famously said: "Anyone who writes for reasons other than money is an idiot." He then dedicated himself to wasting time in taverns and in Mrs. Thrale's salon, surrounded by a select public that listened to everything he said without daring to contradict him no matter how eccentric his statements. One of the most radical, according to the trustworthy Boswell, was that

everything man does throughout his life, war, love, work, pleasure, he does only to fill the time, and for no other reason. But the reasons excluded here are all the reasons we do anything and if we force the Johnsonian exclusions on the writer, we're left with a supreme dandy who has freed himself of all the traditional motivations for his work: the commitment to his society and time, the testimony of his experience, the criticism of the evils of the world, the expression of the interior self, and all the rest of the junk that has weighed so heavily on his spiritual peace. For him, the only time that exists is one that would be empty without his work, time that must be filled, usurped, just as, after a long siege, the city of dreams is usurped.

Translated from the Spanish by Frances Riddle