

I write from solitude, and I also speak from solitude. Mateo Alemán, in his *Guzmán de Alfarache*, and Francis Bacon, in his essay "Of Solitude," both said (at more or less the same time) that whoever seeks out solitude is either part god or part beast. I am comforted by the thought that I have not sought solitude but have found it, and from it I think and work and live—and write and speak—calmly, I believe, with almost infinite resignation. And what always accompanies me in my solitude is the conviction of another old friend and mentor, Picasso, who thought that no enduring work can be created without great solitude. Since I go through life disguised as a belligerent, I can talk about solitude without going to extremes and even with a certain gratitude and painful delight.

The greatest prize one can receive is the knowledge that one can speak, that it is possible to emit articulated sounds, enunciate words that signify objects, events, and emotions.

Traditionally, philosophers have defined the human race by the handy means of the neighboring genus and the specific difference—that is to say, by referring to our animal condition and the origin of differences. From Aristotle's *politikon zōion* to the Cartesian doctrine of reason, there have been indispensable signs to distinguish us from animals. And no matter how vigorously ethologists might dispute what I am about to affirm, it would not require much effort for me to round up enough authorities to identify language as the definitive source of human nature, that which distinguishes us, for better or for worse, from all other animals.

We are different from the animals, and since Darwin we know that we descend from them. So the evolution of language is a primordial aspect we cannot ignore. The phylogenesis of the human species includes a process of evolution wherein the organs by which sounds are produced and identified and the brain, which gives these sounds meaning, were formed very gradually, at the birth of humanity. No subsequent phenomenon, from the epic *Cantar de mio Cid* to *Don Quixote* to quantum theory, is comparable in transcendence to the first naming of the most elemental things. Nevertheless, and for obvious reasons, I am going to refer to the evolution of language not in that primitive, fundamental sense but in another,

which may appear secondary and accidental but which is vastly superior in importance for those of us who were born into a community with an ancient literary tradition.

In the opinion of ethnolinguists as illustrious as A. S. Diamond, the history of languages—of all languages—has sailed across a sequence in which sentences began in the remote past as simple, primitive structures and in time grew complicated, both in their syntax and in the semantic content that they can convey. By extrapolating that historically verifiable tendency, one may also assume that in the move toward complexity there was an initial phase in which the greater part of the communicative weight falls to the verbs; then came the present situation, in which nouns, adjectives, and adverbs add spice and density to sentence content. If this theory is correct and we let our imaginations drift a bit, we could conclude that the first word was a verb in its most immediate and urgent form—that is, a command.

The imperative mood has naturally retained considerable importance in communication, and this verb form is difficult, requiring great care, for one must know in detail the not always so simple rules of the game. A misplaced imperative can lead us to convey the opposite of what we wish to say. John Langshaw Austin's famous triple distinction (among locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary language) adequately expresses the thesis that perlocutionary language tends to provoke a particular conduct in the addressee. It is useless to issue a command if one's listener feigns a response and instead does whatever he or she pleases.

From the *politikon zōion* to Cartesian reason, there has been a clear demarcation between the field where the beast grazes and the field where the human being sings (not always in a well-pitched voice).

Cratylus, in the Platonic dialogue named after him, hides Heraclitus in the folds of his tunic. Democritus, the philosopher of the whole and the void, speaks through Cratylus's interlocutor, Hermogenes; so, too, perhaps, does Protagoras, the antigeometrician who in his impiety went so far as to state, "Man is the measure of all things"—of those that are, insofar as they are, and of those that are not, insofar as they are not.

Cratylus was concerned with the problem of

language, with that which is as much what it is not as what it is, and in an entertaining chat with Hermogenes he considers the question. Cratylus thinks that names are naturally related to the things they name. A thing is born—or created, or discovered, or invented—and in its soul, from the time of the thing's origin, there resides the correct name, which both identifies the thing and distinguishes it from other things. The signifier, he seems to imply, is a pristine notion hatched from the egg of each thing; and except for the reasonable conditions that generate etymologies, a dog is *dog* (in every ancient language), from the first dog on, and love is *love*, the evidence suggests, from the first love on. In his reasoning, Cratylus, as the counterpart of Heraclitus, meets a paradoxical limit that crouches in the hermaphroditic notion of the inseparability (or unity) of opposites, in the harmony of the opposed (day and night) in a permanent motion that reaffirms their substance—and so with words, too, as objects in themselves (there is not *dog* without *cat*, *love* without *hate*).

Hermogenes, in contrast, thinks that words are only conventions established for the reasonable purpose of facilitating communication. Things appear to us, and when we face a newborn thing, we baptize it. Its signifier is not a spring in the forest but a well dug by a human hand. The parabolic border between the felt and the spoken, delineated by Hermogenes and obscured by Democritus (and at times by Protagoras), becomes a sensitive area. Is the human being, who measures (and designates) each and every thing, a genus or an individual? And is the measure of those things a strictly epistemological concept? And are those things merely physical, or do they also include sensations and concepts? When Hermogenes reduces being to appearances, he beholds truth in the cradle; but if we admit as the only possible propositions those that we, humankind, formulate for ourselves and concerning ourselves, we designate as true—and nothing other than true—untruth as well as truth. Remember that, in Victor Henry's famous statement, we name things but cannot take the names back; we change language, yet we cannot change it freely.

Plato, in speaking (perhaps too cautiously) about the suitability of names, seems to be sym-

pathetic, even if subliminally, to Cratylus's position: things are called what they must be called (an organic theorem whose respectability has practically made it a postulate of pure reason) and not what human beings decide after seeing which way the wind is blowing (decisions that are shifting corollaries or, rather, that fluctuate according to the changeable present suppositions—not any previous ones—in each case).

This second view, originally romantic and in its consequences demagogic, spurred the Latin poets, with Horace leading the way, and it is the source of all the ills that we have suffered ever since and have been unable to remedy.

Verses 70–72 of the *Ars poetica* celebrate the triumph of the use of language over its evolution (and evolution is not always healthy, to say the least):

Multa renascentur quae iam cecidere, cadentque
quae nunc sunt in honore vocabula, si volet usus,
quem penes arbitrium est et ius et norma loquendi.

This time bomb—whose charity is pleasing, though—had ulterior effects of considerable complexity, the last of which was the assumption that a culture or community of speakers—and, fatally, no one but that community—makes its language and that one can spare oneself the vain effort of reducing language to a logical, clean, reasonable norm. Horace's daring statement—that linguistic arbitration, right, and norm lie in the use of language—converted the shortcut into a main highway by clearing the undergrowth, and humankind has taken that road, waving the flag of language and obstinately confusing triumph with the servitude of mere appearances.

If we grant that Horace was partly right, and we should not quibble about the point now, and that he was also off the mark, and we need not pretend he was not, we should also concede victory to both Cratylus and Hermogenes. Cratylus's position may be called a defense of ordinary, natural language or speech, of the product of a historical or psychological path that has been traveled on almost forever, and Hermogenes's idea fits in with what we understand as artificial or extraordinary language, or slang, the fruit of some kind of formal agreement, with a logical basis but without a

historical or psychological tradition, at least when the agreement was conceived. The early Wittgenstein, in the *Tractatus*, is a well-known example of Hermogenes's position in our time. In this sense, it would not be farfetched to speak of Cratylan or natural or human language versus Hermogenian or artificial or parahuman language. It is obvious that I refer, as Horace did, to Cratylus's position—to the language of living and writing, free of technical or defensive constraints.

Max Scheler also alludes to what I call Cratylan language—and so do the phenomenologists, in general—when he speaks of language as mention or as announcement or expression. And Karl Bühler similarly classifies the three functions of language as expression, appellation, and representation.

It goes without saying that Hermogenian language naturally admits its originally artificial character, whereas Cratylan language resents any attempt to rock it in an alien cradle, where, more often than not, it finds lurking certain constraints that are foreign to its diaphanous spirit.

In any event, it is risky to accept that natural, Cratylan language is born in the magical wedding of speakers and chance. No, speakers do not create language—they condition it. Let it be said, with not a few reservations, that speakers, in a certain sense, “guess” language, the names of things, but they also adulterate and hybridize language. If speakers faced none of those constraints I mentioned earlier, exposition of the issue would be immediate and linear. But the object that, although unproposed, harbors the truthful core of the problem is one thing in particular and it is not in my capabilities, or in anyone else's, to exchange that object for another.

Cratylan language—Ferdinand de Saussure's langue, structure, or system—comes from a community of speakers (born more among the speakers than directly from them); it is set and authorized by writers and is usually regulated and channeled by academies. But these three agents do not always fulfill their duties, and they often invade, or interfere with, alien realms. One might say that academies, writers, and the community of speakers do not play their roles with gusto, that each group prefers, even though it is not appropriate, to act out the parts of the others, so that (and

it might even be a question of principle) the coordination of roles always remains blurry and undefined and, what is worse, ultimately clouds over the very object of attention: language, the word, which should ideally be transparent—or algebraic and, like a mere instrument, valueless except for its use, as Unamuno describes it in his novel *Amor y pedagogía*.

A final determining factor is the state, that body which, without exactly comprising the community of speakers, or the writers, or the academies, nevertheless conditions and constrains language, gets into it in all sorts of ways (administrative slang, politicians' speeches, television, etc.), adding, more by bad example than by inhibition, confusion to the disorder and chaos to the commotion.

No one assesses linguistic calamities, whether they are popular, literary, academic, governmental, or otherwise inspired, and language goes along, not in the direction it wants, a course that in theory would be desirable, but wherever it is pushed by the clash of forces converging on it.

The people, because they repeat Horace's verse at every turn, think that everything is as simple as pie, and so they try to implant words and new ways of speaking that are not divined intuitively or subconsciously—in a way that might be valid and plausible or might at least produce something that was—but are deliberately and consciously invented or, far worse, imported (in an untimely way, going against common sense).

Writers, trailing the frequently adulterated use patterns of their environments (with as many exceptions as you will), accept and authorize inherently uncomfortable ways of speaking or, what is even more dangerous, ways of speaking that are divorced from the spirit of the language.

The problem of the academies is determined by the axes on which they turn: their conservative tendency and their fear that this tendency will be flung in their face.

The erosion of Cratylan language by Hermogenian is more and more noticeable as time goes by, and it entails the danger of dissecting what is alive, of artificializing the natural. And this risk can develop, I repeat, as easily on the path of pure invention as it can in gratuitous incorporation or in untimely resurrection and revivification.

Very minimally political reasons seem to be the

engine that fires and in the past has fired languages, all languages, to surrender happily to their assailants. It seems to me that the risk run is disproportionate to the somewhat utopian benefits to be had in an uncertain future, and, without purist worries (which are far from my soul), I would alert writers especially and the academy next and then subsidiarily the state to control this disorder that is plaguing us. There is a continuum in language that is more powerful than any classifications we establish, but this fact does not authorize us to tear down language's natural frontiers. To assume the opposite would be tantamount to admitting defeat ahead of time.

Let us sharpen our wits in defense of language, all languages, always keeping in mind that confusing the procedure with the law, just like taking the letter for the spirit, leads only to injustice, a situation that is the source—as well as the consequence—of disorder.

Thought, with its inseparable appendage language, and freedom, which could also probably be linked to certain linguistic and conceptual forms, together compose that general kind of framework in which all human ventures fit: those that explore and extend the frontiers of what we call human and also others that, in contrast, seek only to abdicate the human condition. Thought and freedom make the spirits of both heroes and villains. But that general condition disguises the need for greater accuracy if we wish to understand eventually what it really means to think and be free. Insofar as we can identify the phenomena of consciousness, thinking consists in “thinking to be free.” A multitude of arguments have been used to establish whether that freedom is certain or whether it constitutes just another phenomenon coined slyly by the human mind; but that is probably a useless debate.

A Spanish philosopher has warned us that the authentic image of freedom and its mirage mean the same thing. If we are not free, if we are subject to causal links that are rooted in a matter studied by psychology, biology, sociology, or history, we nevertheless count on the idea—which may be illusory but is universal—of our freedom as human beings. And if we believe we are free, we will organize our world in a way that is very similar to what we would choose if we should, in fact, turn

out to be free. The architectural elements on which with greater or lesser success we have grounded the complex workings of our societies postulate human freedom as a fundamental condition, and with that condition in mind we appraise, extol, re-vile, punish, and suffer, with the aura of freedom as the spirit that infuses moral codes, political principles, and legal norms.

We know that we think, and, indeed, we think because we are free. We are like the dog that chases its tail or, rather, like the dog that is eager to capture its tail; for being free is as much an immediate consequence of thought as it is an essential condition. By thinking, we can detach ourselves as much as we wish from the laws of nature; we can accept them and subject ourselves to them, of course, and chemists who have surpassed the limits of phlogiston theory will base their success and prestige on that servitude. But in thought, the kingdom of nonsense lies next to the empire of logic, for we can conceive of more than what is real and possible. The mind is capable of shattering its own machinations and then recomposing them in an image that is novel to the point of aberration. For this reason, rational interpretations of the world that are subject to empirical events may be succeeded by as many alternative views as the whim of a thinking mind entertains, especially if that mind is free. Free thought, in this restricted sense, opposed to empirical thinking, is translated into stories. And the ability to tell a story would appear, then, to be a third companion of the human condition, added to freedom and thought, thanks to that pirouette of making truth out of what was not even a simple lie before its story was created.

Through thought we can gradually discover the truth that roams the world undetected; but we can also create a different world, adjusted to thought and to the terms thought comes to covet, because the presence of a story allows for it. Truth, thought, freedom, and story are thus bound in a difficult and at times suspicious relationship, a dark corridor full of equivocal choices, like paths in a maze from which there is no escape. But risk has always been the main argument in favor of adventure.

Stories and scientific truth are not forms of thought; they constitute only heterogeneous en-

tities, impossible to compare because they are built of different codes and with very diverse techniques. So it will not do to fly the flag of literature over the task of freeing spirits if the job involves correcting the new slavery science has created. Quite the contrary. I think it is a question of distinguishing cautiously and diligently the types of science and literature that keep human beings behind walls against which every idea of freedom and will dashes itself. And it is also a question of daring to oppose these types to those other scientific and literary experiments that claim to cling to hope. It would be a step in the right direction to trust blindly in the superior sense of the freedom and dignity of humanity confronted by those suspicious truths that end by dissolving in a sea of presumptuousness. But that is not enough. If we have learned anything, it is that science not only is incapable of justifying claims to freedom but is also in need of crutches to support precisely the opposite stance.

The deepest demands of freedom and human will are the only ones able to ground science and to permit it to escape from the utilitarian approach that cannot resist the trickery of quantitative criteria. It is necessary to recognize that literature and science, although heterogeneous, cannot remain isolated in preventive efforts to define their realms of influence. The isolation cannot continue, because language, that basic tool of thought, precludes it and because our definitions of what is praiseworthy and execrable depend on whether or not we accept commitment in our lives.

It appears to me that literature, as a storytelling machine, rests on two pillars, which in turn constitute the framework necessary for a literary work to be valuable. First, an aesthetic pillar keeps the narrative (or poem or drama or comedy) above a minimum level of quality below which hides a subliterate world where creation is hard to reconcile with readers' emotions. From socialist realism to the many supposedly experimentalist whims, an absence of artistic talent makes that subliterate a monotonous linking of words incapable of forming a worthwhile story.

But a second pillar, the ethical stance, also matters in the consideration of literary phenomena, lending the aesthetic quality a complementary aspect that has a lot to do with everything I have said

about thought and freedom. The ethical and aesthetic precepts naturally do not have the same sense and worth. Literature can strike a delicate balance aesthetically, justifying art for art's sake, and it could be that the quality of aesthetic emotion is, in the long run, more a condition of an open life than ethical commitment is. We can still appreciate the Homeric poems and medieval epic songs, whereas we have forgotten the ethical meanings that they had in the societies where they were created, or at least these meanings do not automatically occur to us. But art for art's sake is, in itself, a terribly difficult concept to put into practice and is always threatened by spurious uses that may twist its real meaning.

Ethical content is, I believe, the element that converts a literary work into something truly worthy of the sublime role of storytelling. But it would be wise to grasp fully the sense of what I am saying, because literary stories, insofar as they express the bonds that unite the human capacity for thought with the utopian experience of a free being, cannot reflect just any kind of ethical commitment. As I see it, literary works contain only the ethical commitments of authors to their own intuitions about freedom. Naturally, individuals, including the most astute and balanced of literary authors, are never capable (or perhaps it would be better to say are not always capable) of surpassing their human condition; they are not exempt from the threat of blindness, and the meaning of freedom is ambiguous enough that in its name the most awful mistakes can be made.

Nor can aesthetic quality be learned in manuals. Fiction is condemned to be right as much in its ethical intuition as in its aesthetic commitment, because only in that way can it acquire an acceptable meaning that is unrelated to a possible passing style or a quickly dispelled confusion. Insofar as the history of humankind is mobile and sinuous, neither ethical nor aesthetic intuitions can be easily anticipated. There are authors whose sensitivity in capturing collective emotions leads them to become magnificent signs of their times, and their work becomes a kind of conditioned reflex. Others, by contrast, take on the thankless and more often than not insufficiently recognized task of placing freedom and human creativity a bit ahead on that road which may not lead anywhere

either. It is useless to say that only through such authors does literature fulfill the function more closely identified with the commitment stipulated by the human condition. If we were to demand absolute rigor of this thesis, only literature that met this test could call itself true literature with full honors. But society cannot be bound only to geniuses, saints, and heroes.

In the search for freedom, fiction has notorious advantages because of the internal malleability of literary narrative. Stories need not submit themselves to any imposition that might limit ambitions, novelties, and surprises, and thus no other kind of thought can keep the flag of utopia hoisted as high as fiction can. Perhaps for this reason, the brainier theoreticians of political philosophy have disguised as fiction those of their utopian propositions that would not have been accepted directly. Fiction does not limit utopia, because fiction is necessarily anchored in a utopian condition.

But it is not only in its facility for utopian propositions that literary expression enjoys advantages. The internal plasticity of a story—the malleability of its situations, characters, and events—becomes a magnificent hearth around which to build blithely a whole workshop—or, if you will, a laboratory—where human beings rehearse their conduct under unimprovable conditions for experimentation. A story is not limited to pointing out utopia; it can also carefully analyze the utopian events and their consequences with all the means that creative thought can suggest, from judicious precaution to nonsense.

The role of literature as an experimental laboratory is underscored when we come to live through periods about which works of science fiction have speculated. Critics have repeated ad nauseam their admiration for the anticipatory talents of novelists who included in their tales the basic coordinates of a course that the world later followed. What is truly useful about stories as experimental sites is not the anecdotes of their accuracy in technical anticipation but instead their portraits, as much the developed ones as the negatives, which are capable of transmuting the colors of a possible world, whether future or present. It is the very fact that we search for human commitments, tragic experiences, and situations capable of illuminating our always ambiguous need to choose blindly

among the inducements of the surrounding world that makes the fresco of literature become an experimental laboratory.

In truth, the value of literature's experiments with conduct has little to do with anticipation, because human conduct has a past, present, and future only in a specific, limited way. There are other, fundamental aspects of our way of being that are, on the contrary, astonishingly permanent, and these aspects allow us to be moved by an emotional narrative that may be temporally very far from us. It is "everyman" who gets the grand prize for writing stories, in an experimental workshop that knows no frontier or time. It is the Don Quixotes, the Othellos, and the Don Juans who teach us that storytelling is nothing more than chess played on a thousand occasions with pieces that fate can conjure up at any moment.

One could think that absolute determinism underlies the so-called freedom I am hawking, and this supposition would no doubt be true were it not for the presence of the author, who, being human, is imperfect, flighty, and confused. The magic of Shylock would never have appeared had it not been for the brilliant bard, whose enduring fame is much less sure, of course, than that of the character he endowed with life and, at the same time, denied death. And what can we say about the anonymous priests and jongleurs who have come down to us only through the products of their talents? Undoubtedly there is something that deserves to be remembered beyond all the sociological or historical determinism besetting us: the literary work has always been and, to the extent that we can imagine the future, will continue to be strictly subject to an author—to an individual source of those ethical and aesthetic intuitions that I refer to earlier—who filters the current that undoubtedly flows from the entire surrounding society. It is this connection between the individual and society that perhaps best expresses the paradox of human being: we pride ourselves on our condition as individuals at the same time as we are tied in a collective wrapping from which we cannot dissociate ourselves without risking madness.

It is possible to extract a moral that describes the limits of the literary as constituting precisely the frontiers of human nature and as instructing further about the condition of gods and demons

(which, moreover, is identical to that of humanity). We can imagine demigods, and the ease with which human cultures invent religions is a sure sign of this facility; our capacity to tell stories may provide a literary basis for illustrating religions, which we have not stopped doing since Homeric times. But not even in that pursuit could we confound our nature and snuff out once and for all the slim flame of freedom, which burns no less in the inner minds of slaves, who can be made to obey but not to love and who can be made to suffer fatally but not to change their deepest thoughts.

When blind rationalist pride was able to revive the biblical temptation in enlightened spirits, with the promise “You shall be like gods,” it did not take

into account that human beings had already managed to go much farther down that road. The wretched and proud souls who had for centuries taken on the task of turning themselves into god-like creatures had already taught us a better lesson: that with effort and imagination, we could be like human beings. And I cannot resist proclaiming proudly that in this enterprise—in large measure still unfinished, to be sure—storytelling has been a decisive tool in every era and in all circumstances, a weapon capable of showing us where to head in the endless race to freedom.

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