

By Alejandra Costamagna

I would like to take this opportunity to refer to literature and journalism as two parallel crafts (a little explanation before: when I speak of “literature” I refer to fiction writing, no poetry. I’m just a fiction writer). I have been exercising a double life between both of them for a decade now, and even though it wasn’t easy at the beginning to adjust my head, my schedule and my finances in two different directions, I think that by now I’ve managed to learn how to live together with this duality on a daily basis. I’m convinced that objectivity doesn’t exist and I know that all I can say today corresponds to my personal and exclusive truth. And, all right, maybe it will look more like a game than an iron-like decalogue, but let’s agree on establishing one thing – fictitious premises, truths full of lies, journalistic and literary semi theories, whatever you want, but always with the irresistible charm of subjectivity. Let’s number them:

One. The one who writes is a potential writer. And what a writer writes is a potential literary text. However, the scripts and the formats vary. We have a periodical, a magazine, a novel, the anthology: a narrative mold. Therefore all the pieces of news, all the stories of life and death can be used as the material of narrative journalism. The difference - or let’s say one of the differences – is that journalism uses general truths while literature, on the contrary, works with the personal truth of the writer himself.

Two. When I speak of narrative journalism I refer to the crossover between journalism and literature. I’m talking about what is known

as New Journalism, whose main concept is the application of procedures proper to the genre of the novel in reporting on real facts. The old New Journalism. But I'm also talking about some concepts like a real novel or non-fiction literature, which use the same concept but turn it the other way round: they take the tools of journalistic investigation and use them to create a literary text.

Three. Both journalism and literature are subjected to great risks. In the same way that journalism might get transformed into a political tool at the service of the apparatus of power, for example, literature can also degenerate in a moment. Let's use as an example what has happened so many times with cultural dissidence. It appears and we applaud it. But then the system comes and eats it up completely. And the dissidence – stubborn thing! – comes back. And the system, and then the dissidence, and the system and so on. It is an official apparatus of the market, and it often tries to cancel the criticism and perpetuate in this way the same scheme: to press writers to care more about being writers than actually writing, and to urge journalists to reproduce the news cable, not to revert ever again to what is known in the trade as the inverted pyramid but to stick to the five “W”s: (who, what, when, where and why).

Four. Journalism can be a good shelter. A magazine like the Spanish *Ajoblanco*, a newspaper like the Argentinean *Página 12* in its beginnings, many of the publications of our pre-democratic Chilean corpses, like the magazines *Apsi* and *La Bicicleta*, are simply literature. But, watch out, because journalism can also become a language trash can. I have already mentioned it in the previous point, and I am not going to insist on this, but to write

reproducing poisonous clichés and some empty journalistic pet phrases can kill any germ of literature.

Five. It seems necessary then to specify that only good journalism is a literary genre. Narrative journalism has various fathers, but the American Truman Capote is, for me, one of the most important.

Six. The main attraction of literature is the possibility of provoking the sensation, always a bit hazardous, that what is told has really occurred, or is going to occur now, tomorrow, here, in the hour of our death, at any moment. The main attraction of journalism is, on the contrary, the invitation to listen to the report of our reality, to attend our domestic performance, to link ourselves with the characters of the chronicle, to link our lives with our news.

Seven. Compromise between journalism and literature has always been a permanent practice. It's almost a constant, you could say. How many good writers have been journalists at some point? (Even though they don't have a paper to certify it, but nothing can be less important than this). In my mental map there are many that appear in a disordered way. These include Jorge Luis Borges, César Vallejo, José Donoso, Rodolfo Walsh, Gabriel García Márquez, Truman Capote, Macedonio Fernández, Ernest Hemingway, Ricardo Piglia, Javier Marías. Among them I can also see a few Chilean contemporary writers, like Roberto Bolaño, Rafael Gumucio, Roberto Brodsky, Francisco Mouat, Roberto Merino, Pablo Azócar or Rafael Otano. What appears too is naturally the narrative journalism (that's what we are talking about, isn't it?) and the chronicle appears as well: from Salvador Novo to Carlos

Monsiváis, in Mexico; from Joaquín Edwards Bello to Pedro Lemebel, in Chile. And so on.

Eight. There were times when writers had to make books for people who were born and who died in their village. Writers were the ones who invented other worlds, with all that was inaccessible in them. Nowadays the writer keeps on inventing of course, but the physical borders have been broken. Now nobody is born and dies in the same place, together with the same elephants. Now satellite is up there to keep us all connected. So here comes the already-mentioned chronicle, it installs itself as an intermediate genre and begins to articulate the radiography of our history. It doesn't mean that literature dies – never ever – it only changes the perspective.

Nine. The Argentinean narrator Tomás Eloy Martínez has said that in Latin America the link that the writer has to memory and truth is so close that it almost converts him into a journalist. Eloy Martínez might be right, I think, because the writer is not a zero. And it is natural and healthy that the writer's gaze gets polluted with quotations, fragments of the society soon get transformed into fiction. The food for a written word is the same spoken word. Literature almost always steals something to reality. Narrators are the verbal robbers of the society, they exist on the margins of an ordered, catalogued, reproducible system. They are, perhaps, pariahs of the speech of power. Or even better, they interpellate power from imagination. I see writers as a kind of gigantic sponge which absorbs everything, as universal voyeurists. And what's a journalist if not a nosey parker? A shred of conversation overheard on a bus, for example, can be a starting point of a great novel or a

journalistic chronicle. A street fight can radically change the course of a story in the writing process or the course of a weekly report. What I'm trying to say by this is that real atmosphere (by that, I mean reality) can affect the creative processes of any type of writing and that this thing doesn't have to do only with what you read, but also with what you hear, what you see on the screen, what you live in the street, what everyday history articulates.

Ten. Personal experience. I repeat what I said at the beginning and I declare that I practice a double life between journalism and literature. But let me clarify that this double life has forced me to separate the spaces in order not to fall into the temptation of inventing facts in journalism or, the other way round, polluting literature with excessive reality. I declare that I am trying to live in, with and out of both of these two professions. And that journalism is generally the one that sets the order and brings a salary at the end of each month, while literature is the one that chaotically sets free my internal ghosts. Literature is a party and journalism is a bond which keeps my feet securely on the ground. And sure, I generally try to spend more time partying than walking firmly on the ground. And sure, it also happens that sometimes I linger too long and never come back from the party.

I should finish here, but since I said that it was not going to be a decalogue I will let myself establish two final points:

Eleven. Unamuno is believed to have said that journalism kills literature. I was just about to assume this grave accusation myself, but I have changed my mind. I just limit myself to saying that any

craft can die if one lets it die. And ⁶ we could blame journalism for this, or any other mortal weapon.

Twelve. At the beginning I said that objectivity doesn't exist and I repeat that. Tomás Eloy Martínez has defined it clearly: "Objectivity is a myth invented by the news agencies". There is objectivity neither in reality nor in fiction. Choosing words is in itself an act of full subjectivity. It's possible that literature has enriched my journalistic work and that journalism has enriched my literature. But to be sure of such a relationship would be something very subjective of me. Besides, is there really a rigid division between journalism and literature? Shall we talk about "journalists - writers" or "writers – journalists"? Narrative journalism or real novel? Who cares? At this point, what importance might names have?

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