



World Library and Information Congress: 70th IFLA General Conference and Council

22-27 August 2004
Buenos Aires, Argentina

Programme: <http://www.ifla.org/IV/ifla70/prog04.htm>

Code Number: 182-E
Meeting: 119. Plenary Session II
Simultaneous Interpretation: Yes

The library in the life of a writer

Mempo Giardinelli

The library in the life of a writer

I would like to begin by saying that if I am a writer that is because there was a library at home . That's how simple it is. And magnificent.

At my home in Chaco, where naps are endless, what was mostly present, years ago, was reading. My house was humble, my father only attended school till 3rd. form and had worked as a baker, traveler, salesman. My mother, who was a piano teacher, was an advocate of reading. And my only sister, who was my elder by twelve years, used to read all the time. The most important piece of furniture in the dining-room was the library: a huge bookcase made of dark wood, that had on the lower shelves, all the books that I could take to read, play, destroy or whatever I felt like doing, and on the top, of course, the inconvenient books, which, intelligently, nobody said that they were inconvenient. I discovered this during my adolescence, naturally, but when I had already loaded myself with several encyclopedias and Lobato Monteiro's adorable books, printed in a Sopena edition that I lost later in some move and whose memory still moves me...

It seems, and it has just been proven at the recent 9th. International Forum for the Promotion of Books and Reading held in Resistencia every year and that ended last Saturday, that many are the colleagues who have undergone similar experiences. From Mexico or from Cuba, from Spain, the United States or Brazil, every writer that speaks about reading begins by evoking the library that had molded him.

Julio Neveleff says in his book *Guardianes, solteronas y preservadores* that "throughout history there had been librarians that had attained fame for reasons not directly related to their profession or, on the contrary, it was because of these other reasons that they had become librarians". And he gives a long list of cases: Achille Ratti, librarian at the Milan's Ambrosian Library and prefect at the Vatican's Apostolic Library, who became Pope Pius XI; the philosopher George Berkeley, librarian at Dublin's Trinity College; the Chinese leader Mao Tsé-Tung was assistant at the Pekin Library; the writer and polygrapher Marcelino Menéndez y Pelayo directed the National Library of Spain; the poet and Nobel prize laureate Saint-John Perse, and also the writers Georges Duhamel, Anatole France and Stendhal. And among us, José Mármol, Paul Groussac, Leopoldo Lugones and Jorge Luis Borges, and some more recent poets such as Héctor Yánover and Horacio Salas, who directed the Argentine National Library a short time ago.

I can say that I was also molded as a writer following that same tradition. My mother was an extraordinary reader and my sister, —who earned a degree in library science from the UNNE— founded in Resistencia the Hipólito Yrigoyen Municipal Library, which holds a very valuable collection, and was its director till last year. I myself have been, during all my life, an amateur librarian.

That is why I believe that, as a writer, I am no less than a product of the heterodoxy of my readings and the accumulation of ideas and experiences that I have gathered during the years, of course, but the years with the library. Because without it, nothing would have been the same.

I have never been that kind of writer that theorizes literature from the educational and academic point of view. It has not been my way of doing things, I guess because at University I studied Law and not Literature. I am certain that it is to this circumstance that I owe my role as a journalist and my vocation to reflect on ideas about the culture and the politics of our problematical country. I am also certain that my role as a writer derives from my education as a reader, which in my case means my sister and my mother, from whom I inherited an heterodox, but also unrelinquishable, book education that, above all, stimulated freedom and limitless curiosity.

What I really love is to *make* literature, not to study it, and to reflect then on what has been written. It is there where I seek for revelation, of the origins as well as of the sense of the concrete work. That is why literary analysis, in my opinion, is rather the revelation of the practice of writing, the submergence into interior labyrinths without a guide or astrolabe and, above all, the discovery of the inherent light that every piece of work should have, and that, without it, would be forgotten. Because literature is always memory, since it is life in writing. And I learned this from being a bookworm.

Of course, when I wrote my first books I did not know all this. But as years went by I found the capacity to, at least, try to think that way. I learned at the Leopoldo Herrera Library, in Resistencia, and at the Bernardino Rivadavia Popular Library and at the Benjamín Zorrilla School Library, that the best thing to do was to read at random but, as someone breathes, incessantly and vitally. So, writing became a kind of walking without any planned direction, in such a way that the project became writing itself and the process of writing consisted of discovering what the project was. I learnt that the hard work of a writer began much later, with his great, torturous and wonderful endeavour, with the hard and rigorous work of polishing up the prose, clarifying the sense, consolidating the idea, and, of course, buffing the style. That is for me the work of a writer: to write without knowing anything at all about what is being written, but relying on all the experience gathered during a lifetime that has been intensely lived and with a whole library in the background. To write consciously about what one does not know, in order to learn why and how; and to seek revelations instead of reaching them, which is much better because it makes the work nobler and humbler. That is to say, writing as indagation, as the introduction into a labyrinth that has no way out and should not have one, but where it is fascinating to walk around, at least, to get lost.

I was taught all this while I was a child. We lived in a house on Necochea Street, which today still exists, and in my evocation of old memories I always see my mother and my sister reading. I see them waiting twice a week for the time when the magazines which heaped the newsstand round the corner would arrive. The weekly magazines at that time (“El Hogar”, “Vosotras”, “Vea y Lea”, “Leoplán”) always included classic and modern reading material. Texts by André Gide or Adolfo Pérez Zelaschi, or Ernest Hemingway, or Rodolfo Walsh or Silvina Ocampo could be found. Good literature was important to those magazines at that time.... Books, instead, arrived by mail. My mother and sister ordered them from the bookstores in Buenos Aires as someone orders a treasure, which, when they arrived, were rapidly devoured. Meanwhile, during the week, they borrowed books from the city libraries. And thus, every day at noon, during lunch, their comments would amuse me, before my father’s respectful and pleased silence, who only read the newspaper “El Territorio”, which contained local news, and “La Nación” of Buenos Aires, which arrived a day later.

Constant reading, literature, conversation, historicizing and narration were, in a certain way, life itself for the women in that house and their girlfriends. And their permanent auxiliary were the libraries. The one at home was an inexhaustible source of comparisons, metaphors, dreams and possibilities. They would take books from the shelves of the bookcase in the dining-room and then put them back in the same way as one takes the thyme and the pepper from the spice rack in the kitchen. Today I believe that that was why I have always felt writing to be so feminine. I have always spent the best moments in my life listening to narrations full of intrigues and illusions, of love and lack of affection, of dreams and frustrations that came out from the mouth of women, and women who used to read a lot and had, therefore, their imagination and passion well trained. That is how I became immersed in the literature that were their words, always full of feelings, full of frenzy and madness as if life paralleled the novels and short stories that we read at home. That is how I myself became a reader and plunged into Verne and Monteiro Lobato as well as into Kafka's complete works and the inconvenient Alberto Moravia; into the fascinating and appropriate stories by Salgari and Stevenson, as well as into Dostoevsky's and Par Lagerkvist's density; into Robinson Crusoe's adventures and into forbidden texts such as *Lady Chatterley's Lover* by D.H.Lawrence's or *Memoirs of a Russian Princess*. From then on, all my homes, always, all of them, have been full of novels and poetry, of short stories and also of dreams dominated by narrations told by my aunts, fiancées, lovers and girlfriends. But, above all, my life has not been anything else but carrying my libraries as the snail carries its shell.

While I was writing this paper, it seemed to me that my own life had been that of an amateur librarian. I see myself as a child, playing with wooden toy cars and tin soldiers among the books that I pulled down from the bookcase, from the lower shelf, which was mine. I made highways with Conrad's books or with *Martín Fierro*, and big buildings or fortresses to conquer with my little Larousse or with encyclopedias such as the huge Sopena, comprised of two volumes. I would spend my naps immersed in those games with their covers, pages and their drawings, those fascinations that were endless because I felt that the infinite world of the library was already mine. As in Escher's drawings, you must remember the one with the endless ladder, that architecture of life was being given to me and I had already begun to appreciate it before I came to realize that.

We are, strictly speaking, what we have read. While I was at school, Colegio Nacional de Resistencia, and was an adolescent like all others, rowdy, sportsmanly, irresponsible, and more or less blitheful, I had set up in my student room a small library which was comprised of books that I had inherited after my parents premature death and of books on sale that I had been buying with my first savings. My Winco¹ and some records were all the capital I had and my treasure in my life. This was so true that at once I became obsessed. As at home we were relatively poor, we took very good care of our books and always mended them: with the old, original and sticky Scotch-tape and with glue and cardboard, my sister and I were expert at mending rickety books. So, as soon as I had settled down in my student room I ordered my first stamp, a little one which I still have and that says, "Stealing books is the worst thing that can be done. This book is mine". I stamped all that capital and today I still find amusing and moving to find that sentence stamped on the oldest books.

When I was at Law School, I did, naturally, specific reading, although I already knew that I was never going to become a lawyer. I still have some of those books and all my annotated codes, but I would spend afternoons and nights reading at the Herrera Library, which is next to the Cathedral in Resistencia, and many times I would divert from Law to Literature, as it finally happened. My life as a reader, even then, had already been defined, because at Law School, at the Library or in my student room, it was the library that dominated my education, together with my first sex games, football, rugby and the dances on Saturday, which, in the provinces, constituted a part of the humanistic education of all young girls and boys that were 20 years old at that time.

Then I became a journalist and that was during the 70's –very hard times. I dropped out of Law School and went to Buenos Aires and completely devoted myself to Literature. I wrote my first short stories and an awful novel that I never published, but I kept on being the portable librarian that I would be all

¹ The brand of a record player

my life. I carried the library to Buenos Aires, and it was so big by then that there was no room in the small apartments I rented. Books in the kitchen, in the bathroom, under the bed, I could lose anything—and, in fact, I lost some good love—except my books. Classified by genres, alphabetically, each of them filed, the books of my library were, and have always been, so necessary to me as my identity card, intimate as my underwear, nourishing as milk and bread.

In 1976, as we all know, the tragedy that paved the way for Argentina's entry into its current disastrous situation obliged many of us belonging to the same generation to the horrible crime of having to burn books in order to survive. The murderous dogs of the dictatorship searched, clandestinely, the cities, and they were not only looking for people, but also for ideas, and ideas could be found in books. That is why there were pyres of burnt volumes, bonfires in the streets where ideas and freedom were incinerated. I experienced the shame and the horror, when, during a whole night, ominous and unforgettable, with the shutters down, in the kitchen and in the bathroom of my small apartment of Juramento and Vidal, with fear, shame, pain and rage I had to burn some "compromising" and "dangerous" books, which did not burn easily, because books know how to resist, have a try, books have to be torn page by page, into little pieces and burnt page by page, or "hacerlos crucica" as we say in the Northeast, and flush the little bits of paper down the toilet.

That was like having a limb slowly amputated. For hours and while outside the city was devastated by the dogs of the night that were giving chase and police sirens could only be mitigated by turning up the volume of the classical music concerts broadcasted by the old "Radio Nacional"² or a musical programme that was called "Modart en la noche" (*Modart at night*). But today I think that that was, also, an act of love, of frustrated love, but love in the end, because one destroyed every single book swearing that one day, a luminous day of justice and freedom, one would recover and treasure those books in a new, big and enriched library.

The amputation arrived, massive and complete, on the night of July, 1976, when I was told by Losada Publishers that the Army was "clearing"—what a word!—warehouses and burning books in the street. Among them, my first novel. I was advised no to stay in my apartment and obviously, that was when my exile began, where I marched into, with just a few books, two weeks later. The cold night in which I arrived at Ezeiza Airport, leaving behind a city plagued with military controls and garrisons where beastly murderers were the owners of life and of death, I was carrying a copy of *Divine Comedy* by Alighieri, the small editions of *Bestiario* and *End Of The Game (Final de Juego)* published by the Latin American Publishing Center, a couple of books by Borges edited by Emecé Publishers and a cheap edition of *Tobacco Road*, the memorable novel by Erskine Caldwell. It was my perfect portable library. Without it, I could not move.

And in Mexico, I formed—or reformed, or reorganized, I do not know which is the right verb—another library, a new one which, however, was the same. For nine years, and while my first books were published, I set up a library in my Mexican house, dreaming of my return. And a library—I would like to say—that was enriched with the vast and nourishing Mexican library, and, above all, with the immeasurable Latin American literature, with authors from all countries which I learned to love and appreciate in such a manner that my education ceased being municipal, that is to say, so limited as Argentine canonical literature has always been, so typical of Buenos Aires and so pretentious of universality. Today I am grateful to life because that pain of exile held for me, however, that library which I did bring back, when the Argentines recovered Democracy, in a container that I personally and lovingly dispatched in the port of Vera Cruz one morning, twenty years ago, in 1984.

And back here, it was because of that library that I was able to conceive the only magazine that I have invented in my life, which took up all my efforts and a precious time, as I believe is the period between 35 and 45 years old in the life of a man. In those years I founded *Puro Cuento* and my library was the starting point. Everything consisted in remembering, rereading, taking from this or that shelf

² The official station

to create that magazine which today is almost mythical and so dear in the provinces and abroad. The 800 authors and more than 2,000 short stories that we published sprang up from that library. From that library which I loved and still do so and to which, I realize that now, I am paying loving homage by means of this piece of writing.

From my first Foundation, which was called *Puro Cuento*, we undertook the task of opening some libraries because I knew how important this was. I have always loved shelves full of books and I wanted other people to receive all the love, all the decency, all the fantasy and the imagination that libraries have given to me. That is how we founded one in Puerto Iguazú and another one in Alvear, on the bank of Rio Uruguay in the province of Corrientes; and another one in San Cristóbal, in the wooded north of the province of Santa Fe. We conducted the first national survey on reading habits, in 1991 and 1992, which was never published because we went bankrupt, but its results –quite a revelation– marked my life during the last years.

Because even when the magazine *Puro Cuento* went bankrupt, my library kept on being the real asset that should be safeguarded. As happens in marital separations, in my only legal divorce, in the scores of removals and in the endless places I have lived —pensions, cheap hotels, apartments, borrowed houses, love or clandestine political shelters, hovels and basements, penthouses of rich guys and extravagant bachelor's pads— libraries have always been the only undisputable asset, the only unnegotiable patrimony, the most precious set of assets that have always mattered to me more than a new suit, shoes or shirts.

I have been and I am such a faithful lover of libraries, that, in my trips, I always carry in my suitcase a copy of *Don Quixote* and the three or four books that I am finishing to read, and I can swear, not without pride, that there was no hotel nor bed on which there had not been a pile of books by my side. Wherever I have slept, I have had books on guard next to my head. I lacked love and company, I lacked blankets when it was cold and aerations when it was hot, I lacked sympathy and wisdom, I lacked good sense and serenity an infinite number of times. But never was a book missing; and I have always had the treasure of having a small and minimum library handy.

Today I preside a Foundation that has been devoted, for a decade, to the promotion of books and reading and to which I have donated all my holdings. The library holds 12,000 volumes which are in the process of cataloguing and are used for consultation by our Study Center, our Research Institute and also our Programme “Abuelas Cuenta Cuentos” (Grandmothers Tell Stories), which began four years ago and has evolved, thanks to the enthusiasm and perseverance of scores of people that work systematically, from the simple idea that there is no better way of stimulating reading than by sharing texts with love. Our Grandmothers are not oral narrators, they are readers. And they not only promote reading, but also *provide* reading to thousand of helpless children, lacking bread as well as texts, in schools, hospitals, and canteens for children in Chaco, Corrientes and Misiones, where we set up small libraries and/or help in the already existent.

In our Study Center we dictate courses on the pedagogy of reading, we have published books that organize this new concept and we offer several alternatives: keep-fit courses for teachers and courses on library science during all year round. And we have created and support, also, a programme devised to give aid to canteens for children, that engages scores of generous and active people, to read stories and, at the same time, provide first quality milk, every day, to more than 600 children.

You must realize that I can only be proud and stimulated by the passion bestowed by all those volunteers, summoned by that library that accompanied me all my life.

I have just used the word “passion”. And I would like to examine this word for a second, to conclude, because all this is precisely about instilling the passion for reading, which is the first and main objective of any library. Only with passion can we transmit reading as what it is: an act of generous love, charming and educational. I have taken the view, for years, since the first Forum was inaugurated in my territory, that there is no worse kind of cultural violence than the process of brutalization that

occurs when one does not read. A society that does not take care of its readers, of its books and its media, that does not safeguard its printed memory and does not encourage the development of thinking is a society culturally suicidal. It will never know how to exercise the social control that an adult and serious democracy requires. The fact that a person does not read is a stupidity, a crime that he will pay for the rest of his life. But when it is a country the one that does not read, that crime will be paid for with its own history, all the more if the little material read is rubbish and, on top of that, rubbish is the rule in the great systems of mass media.

As you may see, everything started the day I decided to donate my personal library to provide a basis for the library that the Foundation houses today. It is there now, in a rickety building which has a sad memory and that one day we will recover, when we raise enough money. For the time being it is in boxes, without shelves and in process of cataloguing, but alive, intimate and wonderful.

Thank you very much.