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THE TIME OF THE AUTHOR

## **Getting Poems from the News**

Juan Gabriel Vásquez

In 2009, I was in the middle of a very serious literary crisis; in other words, I was writing a novel. I had spent the previous year trying to shape the story of a retired pilot, a middle-aged man who has just been released from prison after serving twenty years for drug trafficking. The story was mostly set in the early 1970s, when Richard Nixon's War on Drugs was turning the private vice of marijuana into one of the most lucrative illegal industries on the world, thus creating the first small Latin-American mafias; those mafias, as everyone knows, would subsequently turn into the drug cartels that forever changed the history of my country. The early years of drug trafficking had never been deeply explored in fiction, and I was intent on filling that void; but the effort was going nowhere. After a year's work, all I had to show was 150 pages of prose that seemed distant and unconvincing, although I had put into them everything I knew about writing. Any novelist knows the feeling: you work away at your paragraphs, you incessantly

polish your sentences and chisel your adverbs, you go back to your Tolstoy for characterization and to your Flaubert for structure, but somehow the novel still seems far away from you: it seems alien. And you start wondering why it is absolutely necessary that you tell this story; and you begin dreading the moment in which the revelation comes: *it is not*. It is not necessary, for that story could have been written by anybody else. Lose it, and the world remains unchanged; what's worse, *you* remain unchanged. You discover you were never invested (morally, emotionally) in these anecdotes, in these characters; you discover the story had never belonged to you.

But the gods of literature can sometimes be merciful. One day in June, I opened up a magazine and stumbled upon the photograph of a dead hippo. According to the text, he had belonged to Pablo Escobar's former zoo in the Magdalena Valley. Escobar, the most violent drug lord in the history of the trade, had enjoyed spending millions of dollars on exotic animals; when he was killed in December of 1993 (after leading a war against the Colombian state that left at least 6,000 dead and many more traumatized for life), the zoo was seized by the state and the animals, all but forgotten, began slowly to die or escape. The hippo was one of them; after two years spent destroying crops and terrifying peasants, the army hunted him down. And there they were, in the picture: a bunch of soldiers with rifles surrounding the dead mass of the hippo's body. At first, I didn't realize what it was that made me so uncomfortable; but after a while I noticed that the image of the hunters surrounding the hippo was strikingly similar to the one of the policemen surrounding the dead body of Pablo Escobar himself,

just minutes after he was shot down on the rooftops of Medellín. Within seconds, that hippo had become a sort of surreal *madeleine*, and I began, for the first time since I had fled Colombia in 1996, remembering that decade in which terrorism —bombings in shopping malls or commercial airplanes, shootings in restaurants or in the streets— became commonplace for my generation. And this was my epiphany: that my novel was not about that pilot and his life in the 1970s, but about my generation and its legacy; that it was not about the past wars, but about the present scars and memories. The news of a dead hippo published in a 2009 magazine gave me the key to my novel. And so the past, which has always been my obsession, in this novel turned out to be nothing more than the hidden manifestation of a piece of breaking news.

My point is that the novelist's relationship with the ghosts of the present, at least as they appear in the media, is uneasy and unpredictable, and can't be wrapped up in the comfortable cliché stating that actuality is for journalists, whereas literature always needs time. Of course literature needs time, if for no other reason than the fact that novels take so long to write. A deep, comprehensive and thoughtful investigation into a subject, composed in careful language and enriched with a carefully considered outlook on life, will consume several months and quite likely several years— by which time the world has already changed, your original impulse has receded in the distance and the opinion you had on it has gained new nuances, new gradations of colour, new tinges. The opposite impulse, the instinctive and immediate attack on a contemporary subject, can have terrible consequences. Colombian novelists know a little about that. In the

1950s, while a young Caribbean writer called Gabriel García Márquez was trying to publish his first books, the country was succumbing to a civil war that would eventually leave more than 300,000 dead. It was the period we call *La Violencia*, The Violence, with a (dreadful, appalling, ominous) capital V. The daily massacres, as they appeared in the papers, proved very stimulating to emerging as well as established novelists, who began writing about the dead almost before they had time to mourn them. But the novels were not good; in fact, they were a failure. García Márquez was perhaps alone in realizing where the trouble lay.

It is understandable, therefore, that the only national literary explosion we have ever had —the so-called “Novel of the Violence”— should represent an awakening to the reality of a literally frustrated country. Without a tradition, the first national drama we were conscious of surprised us unarmed. In order for the complete literary digestion of political violence, a series of pre-established cultural conditions was necessary which would have supported the urgency of artistic expression at a critical moment.

Elsewhere he argues that Colombian novelists not only didn't enjoy a solid tradition on which to start building their own books, but they didn't even have the ingenuity or basic cunning to realise that they should have taken the time to learn to write novels before trying to use novels to explore what they saw in the news. Newspapers were too much with them; their novels became books with a thesis, pamphlets, a mere —this is García Márquez again— “inventory of deaths”. Their fictions, though full of good indignation and humanitarian purposes, are utterly lacking in art. By art I mean, besides the simple values of style and structure, that kind of deeper perception that is born when the novelist lets the novel think by itself

instead of making it a vehicle for his own, limited opinions. Dealing with a news item in fiction is different because fiction tends to think for itself. Novels are more intelligent —smarter, more comprehensive— than their authors, who are irredeemably tied to prejudices, feebleness, ideology, and even faith. To my mind, the incident that best describes this process is the writing of one of my tutelary books and perhaps the best political novel of all time: Dostoevsky's *Demons*.

On 21 November 1869, while spending some months in Dresden, Dostoevsky came upon a piece of news. His routine during his German season included rising at one in the afternoon, "because I worked at night", having a walk after lunch and another one in the evening, and then coming back home to tea and seven hours of work. "During my evening walk" he explains in a letter, "I stop at the reading room where there are Russian newspapers and read the *St Petersburg Gazette*, the *Voice* and the *Moscow Gazette*". One of those afternoons, through one of those newspapers, he learned about the murder of a certain Ivan Ivanov, a student at the Petrovsky Agricultural Academy, by a twenty-two-year-old nihilist leader called Sergei Nechaev. Ivan Ivanov had been a member of Nechaev's clandestine revolutionary group, but had recently quit; fearing he might turn informer, Nechaev and his accomplices killed him —a shot to the head— and threw his body, weighted with bricks, into the icy waters of a lake.

This small *fait divers* made a strong impression on Dostoevsky. He was at the time working on a huge project, a mammoth of a novel he referred to as "my religious poem", originally called *Atheism* but now

carrying the working title of *The Life of a Great Sinner*: the book that would confirm his reputation and put him, he thought, in the same league as Tolstoy and Turgenev. But he was in desperate need of money, and the piece of news about the murder provided him, he thought, with an easy subject with which to earn quickly and ventilate certain political resentments. "I have tackled a rich idea," he wrote to a friend. "Like *Crime and Punishment*, but even closer to reality, more vital, and having a direct relevance to the most contemporary issue." In December he began taking notes about the two young men and their conflict. The situation seemed to provide him with a metaphor of the Russian confrontation between Westerners and Slavophiles: Ivan Ivanov represented the "New Russian Man", an embodiment of the Slavic character; Sergei Nechaev, the nihilist, was the quintessential enemy, the depraved and distorted inheritance of the liberals and the idealists of the previous generation — the people who, in Dostoevsky's mind, were succeeding in selling the Russian soul to the influences of Western thought. He was going for the polemical: "What I'm writing is a tendentious piece," he explained. "I wish to speak about several matters even though my artistry goes smash." His opinions on the matter were so strong that he began talking about a "novel-pamphlet". But in July 1870, some sort of creative accident took place. "Two weeks ago," he writes to Sofia Ivanova, "getting back to work, I suddenly saw all at once what the trouble was." And then: "Everything had to be radically changed; not hesitating for a moment, I struck out everything I had written, and I began again on page 1. The work of a whole year was wiped out."

What happened? The new project that had sprung out of the Russian

newspapers began mixing up with *The Life of a Great Sinner*. The pamphlet novel got mixed up with the deep, *novelistic* exploration of the subject that intrigued and fascinated Dostoevsky his whole life: belief in God. The main characters that enact this essential point of conflict come, as it were, imported from the serious novel. Dostoevsky discovered, little by little, the impossibility of writing only a pamphlet. Stavrogin, one of Dostoevsky's richest creations, has taken over as the centre of the novel, and displaced both the Nihilists and the Slavophiles; the political satire has turned into a deep moral exploration of the darkest corners of our being, of good and evil working within the always difficult terrain of politics and father-and-son conflicts. To his publisher, Mikhail Katkov, he writes these often-quoted words:

One of the major events of my story will be the murder of Ivanov by Nechaev, which is well known in Moscow. I hasten to make a reservation: I do not know and never knew either Nechaev or Ivanov, or the circumstances of this murder, except from the newspapers. And even if I knew, I would not have started copying. I only take the accomplished fact. My fantasy may differ in the highest degree from the actual reality.

*I would not have started copying*: these are the words that Colombian writers from the time of *The Violence* did not know, even though in previous decades (the decades of Joyce and Proust and Virginia Woolf) the idea had become common knowledge: novelists do not —should not, on pain of artistic death— limit themselves to reproduction of the actual.

But in recent years, a series of novelists from different traditions

have established, willingly or otherwise, a different relationship with documents in general and newspapers in particular. It is a kind of relationship that amounts to a new poetics; it has, to my mind, opened up interesting possibilities for novelists, which means only one thing: novels now go to places which were before unreachable.

I'm referring to those works that W. G. Sebald, one of the great practitioners of this approach, calls documentary fiction. Dostoevsky or Flaubert used the news as raw material, as part of the creative impulse at a stage before the creative writing begins; documentary fiction uses pieces of news as plot points, narrative devices, or even symbols. Look, for instance, at the narrator of Sebald's novel *Vertigo*, who takes a train from Vienna to Venice and then becomes obsessed with the years Casanova spent imprisoned in the Doge's castle. He describes Casanova's disarray and, finally, his escape. Days later, the same narrator is spending his time in the bar of an Italian hotel, trying to write. Luciana, the woman behind the bar, asks him if he is a journalist or a writer. "When I said that neither the one nor the other was quite right, she asked what it was that I was working on, to which I replied that I did not know for certain myself, but had a growing suspicion that it might turn into a crime story." At some point the writing becomes difficult ("the most meaningless, empty, dishonest scrawl"), and the narrator is hugely relieved when somebody arrives bringing newspapers. "Most of them were English and French," Sebald writes, "but there were also two Italian papers, the *Gazzettino* and the *Alto Adige*." As he finishes reading them, an article calls his attention. As well it should: it announces a play, put on stage at the local theatre, about Casanova's days at

the Doge's. What does this mean? The narrator includes a photograph of the article, presumably so that we know he is not lying; and the effect is indeed strange, halfway between an *objet trouvé* and a coincidence.

*Vertigo* was published in German in 1990. In 1998, a Spanish false novel —thus described by its author, Javier Marías— used photographs and press clippings in much the same way. Javier Marías, the narrator of *Dark Back of Time*, meets a couple of old bookshop owners, Mr and Mrs Stone. A magazine interviews them; its pages are reproduced in the novel with enough quality so that we can read the text. “We even appear in a Spanish novel by Xavier Marías,” Mr Ralph Stone says, speaking about Marías's sixth novel, *All Souls*; and we become aware that we are reading another novel by Marías in which the characters we meet speak within an interview about being included in a book by the author who includes this interview. In a complex narrative built as a house of mirrors and dealing with, among other things, the relationship between fact and fiction, the decision to use this press clipping —and let it condition or contaminate everything that comes— is not, could never be, gratuitous. In *Soldiers of Salamis*, by Javier Cercas, the narrator is a journalist who publishes an article in the Spanish press that enables the whole plot to unravel; in *The Adversary*, by Emmanuel Carrère, the narrator begins by telling us that on Saturday, 9 January 1993, while he was attending a school meeting with his family, Jean-Claude Romand was murdering his own. Four days later he opens the journal *Libération* and reads about the murder. That is the beginning of this extraordinary non-fiction novel. *Question: Is The Adversary a novel? Answer: It must be, since it asks the kind of questions novels ask. Question:*

And what are those? *Answer*: Moral questions. It is as simple as that.

So you see, the novelist's relationship with the news is not as predictable as we may think. It can manifest in many different ways, and our task as novelists is to look closely at these manifestations, understand how they work and take what profit —literary profit— we can from them. What is valuable in them, whether a piece of news works from outside or from within the novel, is the transformation of that material (as García Márquez used to say) through the redeeming power of poetry; or through the virtues of language, pattern and structure; or through that indefinable, magical shift of perspective that may have been in Nabokov's mind when he said the writer should be a storyteller and a teacher, but particularly an enchanter; or, finally, through that underappreciated weapon that is moral imagination, the ability to fill that newspaper clipping with people and actions larger and more complicated than the ones we know. Complication is essential: newspapers are soothing in the sense that they give answers; but fiction is unsettling, because all it does, as Chekhov once wrote, is try to find the most interesting questions possible. "Literature is NEWS that stays NEWS," said Ezra Pound. I will retort with the help of a few verses by William Carlos Williams:

It is difficult  
to get the news from poems  
yet men die miserably every day  
for lack of what is found there.