

On Writing and Exile

## **Let's Give Word to the Word**

By Fernando Garavito

Moving beyond the exile of writers, the world is beginning to be concerned about its own terrifying exile. Millions of human beings, defenseless and with their backs to the wall, are being uprooted in unending, parched, and fly-ridden marches across the earth's entire surface. While you are listening to our words filled with suffering and understanding for a series of fragile individual fates, at this very same moment, in Sudan, four million people lack shelter and protection in facing the violations by their government, which draws on the Janjawid militias to burn houses and to kill, kidnap, and rape ethnic groups dedicated to agriculture. Right now, out of Burundi's six and one-half million inhabitants, three million roam that country, enduring the after-effects of the uncontrollable malaria epidemic of 2001 that infected them, without distinguishing between Hutus or Tutsis. Somewhere in this world that is ever broader and more alien to us, today, at this very hour, the three sons of Ana Xavier da Conceição Lemos shudder at the recollection of their mother, tortured, raped, and murdered before their eyes by the Indonesian soldiers who chose this means to extinguish her voice raised in support of independence for West Timor. Thousands of kilometers from here, old Wayúu women—I know it for a fact—just a moment ago lit the fires with which the tribe's 580 members will protect themselves from night prowlers and

mosquitoes, having been driven from their ancestral lands in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada.

Here, in our comfortable seats, we will never manage to imagine the terror of these nights when the incessant chirping of the cicadas competes with the incessant blasting of the machineguns. I am talking about Colombia, my country, which is exhausting itself in its daily exercise of death. By the time someone in Colombia denounces a massacre, another has already taken place, and another, and another, all constructing our collective memory in violence. No one seems to notice this.

It happened on April 18, in Portete, a magical place embracing the Caribbean. On that day, in that night, the murderers arrived. They shot twelve indigenous people against the wall of the church; they kidnapped—and murdered—thirty more, who were never found, they raped the women, they drove out an entire people, accusing it of the crime of having lived for thousands of years in a place that these murderers want to convert into a stop on the drug trafficking route. In Colombia, that is the only way to live, to die, just as it is in Rwanda or in Sudan or in Angola or in Iraq or in Burundi. Torture and humiliation of Iraqi prisoners also takes place in Guantánamo, and is an everyday event in Israel and the Congo. And we live and talk and smile, and say: “How awful! How awful!” And we shut our ears. And we shut our eyes.

All these actions, anonymous and strident, today form the geography of our tragedy. The colored map we studied at some point, on which the countries

preserved their features and displayed to the others their joy of living, is today a dismal chart occupied by the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. Death, in its versions of murder and torture, is everywhere. In warfare, the battalions return to being hordes of savages commanded by a bloodthirsty psychopath named Giles de Reis. The new forms of plague—inequality, overcrowding, apathy—spread like a cancer, promoted by subtle, candy-coated agents that transform them into products for immediate consumption by the media.

And hunger! Every four seconds somewhere in the world a person dies of hunger: 1 . . . 2 . . . 3 . . . 4: a person. 1 . . . 2 . . . 3 . . . 4: a person. 1 . . . 2 . . . 3 . . . 4: a person. Twelve days ago in Colombia a forbidden subject was broached: poverty. The subsecretary of the United Nations traveled to Cartagena de Indias. And there, with his back turned on the country's most beautiful city, with his feet sunk into "a thick, pestilential slush formed by residual waters from sewers and garbage" where the people put up their houses, he cried in pain. Before his eyes he saw a belt of poverty the likes of which he could not find anywhere else in the world. Then the reporter accompanying him on his visit seemed to wake up from his hundred-year slumber. He opened his story this way: "When Gloria Martínez, a twenty-five-year-old mother of five children, is asked what she ate today, she answers with a despairing gesture: "Three grains of rice and an egg." That, that is hunger. That is the world waiting on the other side of the door.

But one lives and sleeps and writes and yawns. The powerful sense of survival, which once was our rule of conduct, is beginning to dissolve. We play

with liberty, we play with nature, we play with ethics, we play with language, and we trust that nothing happens. Almost one hundred years ago, in 1906, General Leonard Wood and his six hundred soldiers cornered nine hundred Moros, a tribe of ragged, Islamic Philipinos. Using his artillery, Wood annihilated them in the lava cone of an extinct volcano, where they had taken shelter. “Not a single one of the savages remained alive,” claims Wood’s dispatch. And President Roosevelt extolled Wood: “I congratulate you and the officers and men under you orders for the brilliant armed battle in which you and they upheld the honor of the American flag.” Mark Twain denounced this action in a devastating page of his autobiography: Twain raises his voice and says with grand irony: “In the Moro crater six hundred soldiers entered into battle. The enemy numbered six hundred, including women and children—and we abolished them all, leaving not even a baby alive to cry for its dead mother. This is incomparably the greatest victory that was ever achieved by the Christian soldiers of the United States.”

What does Twain propose? Something very simple. He proposes that his readers, we ourselves, add a question mark to his final sentence: “Is this, beyond comparison, the greatest victory ever won by the Christian soldiers of the United States.” And the answer opens the door for us onto a new disparity. We are no longer, it’s clear, in that world. We are in a still worse one. Today they corral us all in the crater’s pit, and they massacre us, our rocks useless as a defense against their artillery. We know that nothing in our surroundings works as it should: not ideas not power not money not future not history not liberty not culture, not

politics not the family not the environment not our management of nature not the way we manage ourselves. Somewhere there is structural fault that corrupts everything. Therefore, the writer, who is not definitely convinced he is Alice or that he is living in Wonderland, poses a question. And I believe that, wherever he may be, by the single act of questioning, of questioning himself, the writer begins at that very moment to be desolate, a broken word in exile.

Exile. Today, to write is to interrogate oneself. But our questions are no longer the subtle questions of other periods. At one time, in *Estravagario*, Pablo Neruda changed my new-found reader's world with a single uneasiness, as light as a feather: "Salt, where did it get / that transparent look?" To this day, at breakfast time, in front of the silent salt shaker placed on the table, and while the wonderful city—where Patrick Lannan and Russell Banks and Jaune Evans and Ronald Christ have given me the possibility of life—, while Santa Fe wakes up under its vast sky of clouds and promises, there, in the depths of my memory, I ask myself the same invariable question, now very old: "Where does salt get that transparent look?" and I feel that everyday things grow more tenuous and unnecessary and that in this house, my house, I want to live, me and mine, from poetry, for poetry. But that instant is only that: an instant. Because, suddenly, wherever we may be, here or in Colombia or Lisbon or any other place, the grinding noise of weapons being readied to fire comes through the window, the violations practiced against the defenseless make themselves heard, the poverty of the homeless and the injustice committed against the "dispossessed of the earth"

become palpable. And that's when the person who writes knows himself to be an exile

Let me qualify: there are exiles and exiles. The stupid, explicit power that oppresses us every day, believes that a threat, a forced displacement, a censoring, any command whatsoever can silence what cannot be silenced. Well, no. The challenge confronting the writer is much more complex than that, much more profound than avoiding a bullet. And here is where I want to posit, perhaps, my difference. Attentive to the miseries of today's world, the writer is, by definition, one of the excluded third parties. This concept, lucidly situated within violence, is now properly beginning to be extended. In a universe where force is the principle of conduct, it is simple to affiliate oneself with a particular idea, a certain position, an identifying expression. In common parlance, one is on the Left or on the Right. Or in the center. But if I am there, claiming to belong to something to which I do not belong, or closing ranks with the unending lines of victims, I in no way accomplish the task that is my responsibility as a person who wields the powerful tool of language. The excluded third party does not enter into battle, and only participates when the opportunity is given him of opting for resistance and for life. We writers are all in a larger battle. If we denounce power, assuming one or another position in confronting one or another confronted position, if we show off ideologies and partisanship of whatsoever stripe, if we convert ourselves into spokesmen for iniquity or for the victims of iniquity and injustice, we will run the risk of falling into the trap, we will put ourselves in danger of substituting for power, we will painfully approach the frontier of an engagement that neither is

nor can be ours. Fighting in the fields of battle should be yielded to soldiers and the military. Fighting in the field of politics belongs to politicians. But the fight will never be won, either on the battlefield or in the political field. The fight can only be won, as always, in the sacred territory of language.

The writer, I mean to say: the exile, has his own specific field of action, and within him is waged the most arduous of battles. I wanted to begin my talk tonight by pointing out that none of the miseries of today's world is unrelated to us writers. These miseries exist, needless to say, in the dismal kingdom of death. Death thus extends his powerful ashen hand and fascinates anyone bold enough to look him in the face. For the writer, death is the destruction of the word. Today pages and pages and pages are written in which the words say less and less, in which the word *peace* is the word *war* and the word *justice* is the word *injustice* and the word *government* is the word *abuse* and the word *terrorism* is the word *manipulation* and the word *soldier* is the word *dangerous*. That is our death. Whoever speaks that way, whoever maintains that the crime of Nasr al Din is an error, or that the murder of the protestors in the square at Rafah, in the south of Gaza, is a regrettable mistake, whoever writes poems and fictions in contaminated languages, with vacant words, will have ceased to be an exile. And that writer will be able to blah-blah-blah endlessly about the poor or the evil wars without ever endangering power because the equivocations of the word will let all that pass unnoticed. Shouting in powerful tones that Latin American democracies are cosmeticized corpses with their backs turned on tragedy and death can be

converted into a witty topic of conversation. How well he writes! What eloquence! But, like D. H. Lawrence, to take life by the hand and burst with it into language, to restore words to the unknown three-dimensionality they once had, to dislocate adverbs and adjectives, to make verbs methods of action, and to shatter preconceptions with nouns and pronouns, to call reason *I* and cat, *cat*, as Vallejo wanted, and to recover letter by letter everything that has been stripped from us, that is, and on a grand scale, the firm, lucid, and coherent revolutionary action that our crisis demands of us.

I mean to say: the writer will always be a writer in exile. That is his thirst, that is his anguish and his agony. His only possible task is to restore word to the word.

Thank you.