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Keys to Reading Neuman

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Spanish-Argentine writer Andrés Neuman.

In “Cincuenta porqués” [Fifty whys] (2011), a blog entry that is almost a statement of a personal poetics, Andrés Neuman states:

I write because as a child I felt that writing was a form of curiosity and ignorance. I write because childhood is an attitude. I write because I don't know, and I don't know why I write. I write because that's the only way I can think. I write because happiness is also a language. I write because pain is thankful to be named. I write because death is a hard argument to understand. I write because I'm afraid to die without writing. I write because I'd like to be who I won't be, to live what I won't live, to remember what I didn't see. I write because, without fiction, time oppresses us. I write because fiction multiplies life. I write because words produce time, and we don't have much time left.

In the following pages, I will lay out seven keys to reading an author whom Roberto Bolaño defined, accurately, as “touched by grace.” Hypnotic, sensual, and suggestive in equal measure, the profound coherence of his literary project is made manifest in the concepts developed below.

Challenges

Neuman has fun with risk and play. Like the soccer player he once dreamt of becoming, he pushes forward between the wings of the page-pitch in order to progress in his thought and hit his mark. It is no coincidence he chose *El equilibrista* [The tightrope walker] as the title of a book

of aphorisms and *El jugador de billar* [The billiards player] for a poetry collection. Speaking of him entails speaking of someone who imbues his work with continuous change and experimentation.

This fact has led him to foray into poetry—from sonnets to haikus, passing through lyrical series—the aphorism, micro-fiction and short stories; the blog—starting with the *microrréplica* or “micro-reply,” an entry of a little over one hundred words; the gregueristic micro-essay; the ledger book, heterodox dictionary entries, journalistic articles, comic strip scripts, theoretical reflections—which explains the existence of frequent codas to his books, featured in the form of dodecalogues, essays, and appendices for the curious; and, finally, the novel. With regards to his three most recent titles in this latter genre, I recall how *Traveler of the Century* is a gothic novel, a novel of ideas, a sentimental novel, and a mystery novel; *Talking to Ourselves* reveals itself as a disturbing and introspective tale of illness and mourning; and *Fracture* as a narration of ecology and memory, coming close to the postulates of the thesis novel in its reflection on subjects like energy, economics, and love.

Passages

If there is one aspect of Neuman’s figure especially emphasized by critics, it stems from his position between two shores, on a bridge he likes to talk about in order to define himself—the same bridge on which critics likewise situate many fellow writers of his generation. This conception is linked to his lived experience; in the novel *Una vez Argentina* [Once Argentina] he wrote of the French, Italian, Spanish, Polish, Russian, and Lithuanian origins of his family, as well as the presence of Catholics, atheists, and Jews among his ancestors. On top of this, we might add his many critical reflections centered on the repercussions of the immigrant experience—an experience he lived alongside his parents and brother, moving from Buenos Aires to Granada at the age of fourteen.

As far as the idea of the passage, if we trace the frequent keys offered in the blog “Microrréplicas,” we observe that among them are concepts as interrelated as *exile, foreignness, identity, journeys, border, and translation*. Reflection on the latter subject represents a constant in his writing, as translation is born from the desire to share, and provides the “step toward others” through language. This explains, for example, how in *Traveler of the Century* the protagonists make love and translate at the same time, reaching climax at the moments while “the more similarities they discovered between love and translation, understanding a person and translating a text, retelling a poem in a different language and putting into words what the other was feeling.”

Ethics

Ethical concerns become consubstantial in a literature marked from its inception by the fact that the author's parents were forced to exile themselves from Argentina in the "years of lead." I recall, in support of this claim, the three "limits" discussed in the salons organized by Sophie Gottlieb in *Traveler of the Century*—limits of country, language, and gender—which lead the salon's attendees into heated confrontations concerning issues such as nationalisms, multiculturalism, and women's liberation. I wish to underline, likewise, the ecological concern written into *Fracture*, the backbone of whose plot is the accident at the Fukushima nuclear plant—a denunciation extending to the neoliberal policies that govern our times.

But if one ethical effort stands out above all others in this writer's work, it stems from his desire to deautomize the gazes that objectify others through the sexual point of view. So, in the tale that lends its title to the story collection *Alumbramiento* [Delivery] he has us witness the biological birth of a male; in his novels, women's voices take on special relevance (let's not forget how the protagonist of *Fracture* is narrated by his various lovers, or the tremendous power of the characters of Sophie and Elena in *Traveler of the Century* and *Talking to Ourselves*). The prose pieces contained in *Anatomía sensible* [Sensitive anatomy] take sticks of dynamite to entomological, heteropatriarchal viewpoints in order to reinvalidate an impure, mobile, and mutant focalization of the body, marked by the multiplicity and openness of the objects of desire. This text, a true political manifesto, proclaims the impertinence of sexual roles, titling some of its chapters "El pene sin atributos" [The attributeless penis] or "Una vagina propia" [A vagina of one's own] (the chapter from which I excerpt, as an example, the following definition: "The trans vagina springs from the ellipsis. [...] Those who disqualify it as artificial forget there is nothing more natural than human will. The synthetic beauty of this vagina is prolonged in its echoes: it has lived both faces, it has felt the other side").

Ambiguities

In Neuman's poetics, "not knowing" constitutes a beneficial value linked to uncertainty and, along with it, to mental openness. This is the source of the abundance of unanswered questions present in his creations—evident in the title of his book of aphorisms *Caso de duda* [Case of doubt]—the frequent rejection of exclusionary disjunction, and the admiration he has expressed for authors like Joaquín Giannuzi, Alejandro Zambra, and Natalia Litvinova, whose texts reject any semblance of certainty. This is the source, likewise, of his praise of old age, since "as we get older, we lose opinions about things. That is to say, we gain ideas" (*Fracture*), or his fondness for characters who verge on mental insanity, like the protagonists of the poetry collection *Patio de locos* [Courtyard of crazies] and stories like "Tornasol" [Sunflower] (*El que espera* [The one who waits]) and "Juan, José" (*Hacerse el muerto* [Play dead]).

This vision is underpinned by the importance in his work of rhetorical strategies that foster ambiguity. Such is the case of the ellipsis, which leads him to write "omissions are the true decisions the story-maker must make" (*El que espera*); of the suspended ending, defined in one of the dodecalogues included in *Hacerse el muerto*: "Some stories deserve to end with a semicolon;" and of the modality of micro-fiction, about which he comments in the *microrréplica*

“Diez microapuntes sobre micronarrativa” [Ten micro-notes on micro-narrative] (2012), “we need courageous readers, that is to say, readers who can bear the incomplete.” This is also the reason for the importance of humor and irony in his work, oblique modes of expression defined in *Barbarismos* [Barbarisms] as “ability to parody one’s own conventions, that is, to think” and “flirtatious sincerity,” which, as we appreciate in titles like *Hacerse el muerto*, possess cathartic effects in the face of the most painful episodes of existence.

Epiphanies

Neuman, in what could be called a clear connivance with the sociologist of everyday life Michel Maffesoli, extols for our days the full measure of the instant, the lucid acceptance of fleetingness, and the cult of “sensitive reason,” which recovers, in contemporary times, hedonistic values like play and the unproductive life. So, the time of the burning heat of bodies confronts the time dominated by production and totalitarian projects.

Consciousness lives in the ephemeral, and writing is revealed as an instant metaphysics in which a vertical timeline runs, distinct from the common horizontal one. The word “epiphany” is defined in *Barbarismos* as “attention with miracle.” The defense of the present is reiterated in his creations. In accordance with this fact, moments marked by intensity and lyricism are repeated in his work. The poetry collection *Mística abajo* [Mystic below] is permeated by this feeling, which provokes a joy as exceptional as it is necessary.

The same goes for the *akmé* described by the parachutist who is the main character of the short story “Aire” [Air]: “There are instants, how to say it, that only a few of us have the chance to live. Instants that betray, freeing us. [...] There are instants, how to describe them, with no possible measure. Instants that lay claim to us. Habits with no way back.” (*El último minuto* [The last minute]).

From what has been stated thus far, one might infer the writer’s interest in the “genres of momentum”: aphorisms, haikus, micro-essays that verge on the greguería and dictionary definitions, brief forms present in titles like *Alfileres de luz* [Pins of light], *El equilibrista*, *Gotas negras: 40 haikus urbanos* [Black drops: 40 urban haikus], *Gotas de sal: 20 maikus marinos* [Drops of salt: 20 marine haikus], *Barbarismos*, *Caso de duda*, and *Anatomía sensible*, but that likewise permeate longer works.

Imperfections

One of the most original aspects of the writer’s poetics stems from his praise of imperfection. This can be appreciated in his rejection of empty essentialisms and purities, and in his defense of de-Platonized matter, a key to poems like “Los errores perfectos” [The perfect errors] (*Década* [Decade]) or “Altarpiece with Common Girl” (*Vivir de oído* [Living by ear]). It is also manifested, in equal measure, in meditations like the one contained in the *microrréplica* “Mito y cicatriz”

[Myth and scar] (2011), where he defends the recollection of a surgical scar on the body of Marilyn Monroe, or on the cover of *Anatomía sensible*, which zooms in on skin marked by two moles and an old wound.

Not in vain, the first quote in this book, taken from Cynthia Ozick, states that “nobody is above their dirty clothes,” which reminds us of the conception of intermingling as a beneficent impurity, written into the extraordinary sonnet “El extraño” [The stranger], which I transcribe below:

Yo me nutro de errores y de sangre,
jamás podré tener otro retrato
que este casi saber, este conato
de amor en la mitad de la masacre.

Hacia dónde camino? Es lo de menos.
Camino, que ya es mucho, y rompo el paso.
Mi sed ya no tendrá forma de vaso
sino de voz impura, aliento lleno.

He cambiado el escudo por la duda
y apenas reconozco mis heridas:
no es la piel, es el tiempo lo que muda.

Dejaré las limpiezas conocidas
por otras suciedades más desnudas
que consigan arder como dos vidas” (*Década*).

[My diet is of errors and of blood,
another portrait I will never yield
but almost-knowing, this attempt at love
connate and central in the killing field.

Towards where do I walk? That matters last.
I walk, which is enough, and break my stride.
My thirst will have the shape not of a glass
but of an impure voice, breath satisfied.

I’ve seen fit to exchange my shield for doubt
and now I scarcely recognize my wounds:
it is not skin, but time that shifts about.
I leave behind the cleanliness we knew

for other dirtinesses, bare and stark
that catch flame like two lives lit by one spark.]

This idea is taken up again in *Fracture*, a novel that turns to the ancient Japanese art of *kintsugi*—which consists of repairing broken objects, filling the cracks along which they broke with gold dust—to revindicate and raise up the stitches that hold our lives together. Along the same line, we can understand the defense of body parts that are commonly disregarded—the elbow, the ankle, the ear, a mole, the eyelid—in the face of other more prestigious parts in *Anatomía sensible*, giving rise to entries with titles as meaningful as “Reprobación del brazo y alabanza del codo” [Reprobation of the arm and praise of the elbow].

Slownesses

Neuman seems to echo the Platonic maxim, “happy are the slow, for they miss not a single detail of life.” This explains the time he takes to conclude each of his literary projects. *Anatomía sensible* is example enough: a set of thirty brief pieces of prose that, as a work that must be savored slowly, he began writing in 2012 and published seven years later.

Thus we understand why he chose the titles *El último minuto* and *El que espera* for two of his books of short stories; why he prescribes, in the “Third Dodecalogue from a Storyteller,” “Stillness as the art of imminence” (*Hacerse el muerto*); and why he revindicates above all others the sense of hearing, which he defines in *Barbarismos* as “tuning fork of prose” (recall the role played by music in the writer’s life, for autobiographical reasons—his parents and brother chose this profession, which led him to title his most recent verse collection *Vivir de oído*).

It is a question, in the end, of “extracting life from life” in all its infinite possibilities and with the greatest possible delight, since, as we read in the text that opens these pages, existence—in ever-precarious balance—slips between our fingers at top speed. This is underlined by the last verses of “Conversación en tres tiempos” [Conversation in three tenses], a text in which the poetic subject converses with the child he was, the young man he is almost no longer, and the old man he will become:

Al viejo que seré le pediría
que me recuerde así, arrugando papeles
para tantear su cara,
que por favor me cuente si va a venir despacio.

[To the old man I will be, I would ask
that he remember me like this, wrinkling papers
to feel out his face,
that he tell me, please, if he’s going to come slowly.] (*Vivir de oído*)

Let us take pleasure, then, in relishing the work of an author who writes “against time,” capable of pausing the hands of the clock.

Translated by Arthur Malcolm Dixon



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research papers, published in Spanish and international journals, which manifest her interest in the most innovative aesthetic movements, from historical avant-gardes to recent poetry and narrative, cultural imaginaries, relationships between image and literature, and hybrid genres.

Arthur Malcolm Dixon is co-founder, lead translator, and Managing Editor of *Latin American Literature Today*. He has translated the novels *Immigration: The Contest* by Carlos Gámez Pérez and *There Are Not So Many Stars* by Isaí Moreno (Katakana Editores), as well as the verse collection *Intensive Care* by Arturo Gutiérrez Plaza (Alliteration). He also works as a community interpreter in Tulsa, Oklahoma and is a 2020-2021 Tulsa Artist Fellow.

Recommended Reading:

"The Art of Bidding Welcome: Andrés Neuman in Translation" by Arthur Malcolm Dixon (</en/2020/november/art-bidding-welcome-andr%C3%A9s-neuman-translation-arthur-malcolm-dixon>)

A Second Pair of Eyes: A Conversation with Nick Caistor and Lorenza Garcia (</en/2020/november/second-pair-eyes-conversation-nick-caistor-and-lorenza-garcia>)

Two Short Stories from The Things We Don't Do by Andrés Neuman (</en/2020/november/two-short-stories-things-we-don%E2%80%99t-do-andr%C3%A9s-neuman>)

Four Poems from Vivir de oído by Andrés Neuman (</en/2020/november/four-poems-vivir-de-o%C3%ADdo-andr%C3%A9s-neuman>)

Three Poems by Margara Russotto (</en/2020/august/three-poems-margara-russotto>)

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In our sixteenth issue, we celebrate Mapuche poet Elicura Chihuailaf, who in 2020 became the first indigenous writer to receive Chile's National Prize for Literature. We also feature dossiers dedicated to the work of Andrés Neuman, Latin American literary criticism, and the Latin American essay, plus a bilingual selection of texts from *Dispatches from the Republic of Letters: 50 Years of the Neustadt International Prize for Literature* commemorating Gabriel García Márquez, the first Latin American author to win the prestigious Neustadt Prize.



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