

Beatriz and the Writer

by Cristovão Tezza

“Writers are not good people. What intrigues me is how the thousands of readers still left in the world, like yourselves, you well-meaning souls in the audience there listening to me, don’t realize this simple, universal truth. Not satisfied with merely reading the books we write, you also want to hear us speak, you line up for autographs, and some of you listen to us with an adoration befitting saints and wise men. Happy, smiling, you attend lectures and round tables where the writers generally trot out a string of nonsense and lies, always the same ones, harebrained theories that they invented, hung-over, fifteen minutes before taking to the podium or which they drag through life like a tablet of commandments that bears no relation to what they write (or, much worse, theories that lamentably *do* bear a relation to what they write), jokes that aren’t funny (writers are almost always – paradoxically – individuals devoid of humor), pathetic attacks of narcissism or just twaddle about their “writing method,” the value of “inspiration,” the importance of reading in the modern world – soon they’ll bring out something like ‘how to make friends writing books.’ The novice poet and the venerable Nobel Prize winner, they all subject their pathetic selves to the ridicule of speaking in public and their drivel is all the same. There must be exceptions, of course – but I’m not aware of them. Readers are credulous – they believe what is written and they believe in those who write. Those who write have “the gift.” And that’s where we go to town. No one realizes that the raw material of literature is contempt. What irritates me, when I look at myself, is this unctuous dependence on other people, not to survive, which would be fair enough, but to feed off them, because if I

weren't surrounded by stupidity I'd have nothing to say and would die completely useless. It'd be one thing if writers could live on their own, in peace – but no, most live in warring groups and tribes, bicker over every centimeter of press coverage, suck up to social columnists, fight desperately for five-minute radio interviews, and would kill their mothers for two seconds on television; they take refuge in cliques, churches and splinter groups, protect themselves in an infinite array of lobbies, the gay lobby, the heterosexual lobby, the feminist, the Jewish, the Arabic, and the communist lobbies, the lesbian crowd, the liberal communists, the supporters of regional causes, the neo-machos, the naturalist-hippies, the bar poet, the genius, the signer of petitions who feels validated because he has a 'cause,' any cause at all, and the drafted sender of emails against whom no anti-virus is good enough, and they all loathe one another with an intensity unparalleled in any other sample of the human species, because their so-called gift with words escalates everything to a state of paranoia, creating a frightening view of reality. At the same time, to make everything worse, they're irrelevant individuals who produce unmarketable flops. Virtually nothing they write is of any importance and fewer and fewer people are interested in them – generally only other would-be writers, intrinsically tiresome individuals, making this tiny arena of letters an infernal cesspool of nightmares, frustrations and revenge. This is the common core – in appearance they're very different, of course, very deceptive. They're even invited to events like this, and the likes of Linnaeus would have a hard time classifying them exhaustively, so rich is the fauna. They have an incredible ability to disguise themselves. A father would walk his daughter down the aisle to a writer, tickled pink, oblivious to what awaits her. There are the thoughtful writers, the grotesque ones, the enormously promising, the rude ones, the unionists, the contest winners,

the presidents of associations, the pornographers, the contest losers, the downright bad ones, the autistic ones, the imitators, the ones who send letters to the editor, the non-writers (who are different from the bad writers) and so on. It's quite obvious: if writers were good people they'd hold a decent job, something truly useful to the brotherhood of man; they'd be normal individuals, capable of getting along and possessing all the humanist values they sing of from time to time, index-finger raised, unable to apply them to their own lives. Writing is always an expression of failure, from which nothing is learned – contrary to real life, in which mistakes make us better people. In literature the opposite is true: the sick presumptuousness that leads us to write and that every so often finds some small resonance – the dish of leftover food for the famished dog, which we lunge at with our tongues out – ends up entirely corrupting our souls, so that after a few years we are good for nothing save measuring our own incompetence, line by line."

I paused for effect and took a sip of water from the awful plastic cup with a certain Episcopal poise, to feel the temperature of the Curitiba audience, with which, tragically, I was unfamiliar; it seems the city has an inexplicable reputation for being highbrow. Beside me, the other guest speaker (whose name escapes me), a friendly municipal novelist and university professor who was trying not to laugh, perhaps because he thought (he doesn't know me), victim of that semiformal kind of respect for others that is the mark of the provinces, perhaps because he thought I'd meant what I said and that laughter might offend me. And then, suddenly, I *felt* the audience's icy silence – in a split second I realized that my cynical, absurd diatribe, albeit inspired (I was speaking with the lightness of one who writes, each comma in its place, the rhythm weighed, the gestures discreet but efficient), was being received, or read, as a succession of stones thrown at their

heads, and they were trying to work out which frequency to tune my mike to – irony, aggression, humor, stupidity – and I could see in the intrigued eyes of the first row a desperate scrabbling to find the precise way to finally understand what I was saying. They were weighing my every-word – in the mortal silence that followed my sip of water – as one might heft a ball of lead in one’s hand. No one smiled. I took another sip, slowly, to gain time – I’d clearly got the tone wrong. The other two times I gave practically the same opening speech – at a biennial in Bahia and the Porto Alegre Book Fair – it was received with guffawing, laughter, a shuffling of chairs, people glancing at one another and whispering something, *that’s so funny*, or *this guy’s really good*, here and there an actively serious face, already rehearsing an argument, and further back a timid protest with a fist in the air, in short, an instant success that quickly occasioned (what one might call “instigating”) questions, some frankly provocative, about literature, cynicism, politics, and ethics that put everyone at ease and I practically didn’t have to think until the end of the event, just replying with automatic, tried-and-tested answers, to then collect my check and get on with life.

But the silence fell with a thud – pardon the image – on the table. I’d been warned that Curitiba wasn’t easy, that I was going to find a stiff-necked lot, hard nuts to crack. But that wasn’t it. The audience was great: they’d absorbed exactly what I’d said, and especially *how* I’d said it. Truth was, I’d gotten the tone wrong because I had, in fact, believed each word I’d uttered. I’d committed the mortal sin of not stepping back from myself, and if there is one undisguisable thing in this world it is bitterness, that corrosive, destructive feeling, that malaise without direction or definite object which, on that day, at that moment, had washed right over me. The novelist next to me had felt like laughing because, being an autistic

kind of writer, he hadn't listened to me, he'd only read me, and in the abstraction of reading everything is a game of double meanings and we all skip happily through a garden of forking paths. But not the audience – they'd listened to me and absorbed me completely, clutched at my soul – they were held in thrall by that spectacle of life, by the abyss of the present moment, something of which no writer is capable. Hence the silence. Hence the three people at the back, indistinct shapes in the darkness, getting up and leaving, discreet enough so that the contempt they felt for me wasn't transformed into a "message." But before you think I was illuminated by some superior, insurmountable philosophical sentiment, a Heideggerian crisis, an existential cul-de-sac, a transcendental awareness of the shortcomings of my profession, I should explain why I was so inexplicably swept up in my own words, and the reason was rather like the ultimate proof of my own thesis, that is, the fact that writers really are awful sorts. Afterwards – I'd have to rid myself of the novelist first – I was going to have dinner with an old hometown rival, a childhood friend, and also, unfortunately, a writer. He'd started writing later, when I'd already established a solid reputation for myself, and, unassumingly, he'd published one thing after another, occupying spaces, winning prizes, making friends, writing regular columns, and now miraculously sold ten times more than I did. He appeared everywhere and was invited to everything, while I, who'd practically taken him by the hand to a big publishing house and wrote fifty times better than he did – but I'm going to change the subject; remembering bothers me, I get short of breath, I feel a compulsion to drink. I took a third sip of water, trying to create some new fact in that terrible silence – at precisely that moment I remembered him, our dinner, the superior (superior no; paternalistic, *protective*) tone of voice in which he'd spoken to me – Let's get

together! Yes, let's! Man, I've split up with my wife. I've started a new life! I'm so glad you could come to Literary Week! I gave your name a good plug down at the Foundation! They're a bunch of idiots. They don't know anything about literature, you know how it is, the same old story! They didn't even know who you were. I had to tell them. Look, I'm going to choose a good restaurant and I'll meet you at the hotel. What do you say? – I felt the audience darken before me and realized I was bogged down in the silence and crushed by memory; I had to go on, say something, crack a joke, back down, with a cowardly *of course that's just a metaphor but*, but I was unable to: I saw my friend's face in front of me, separated from his wretched wife, a woman who was practically my only trump card; his being married to her – and I was his best man – she was my joy, a really ugly, unpleasant woman, thick as a plank, capable of coming out with the most absurd statements and making the biggest confessions in the crowded intimacy of an elevator in a shrill voice hinting at the hysteria of those who are unhappy in the sack – his being married to her was a form of compensation for me: OK, let him do what he wants – he already pays enough for his crimes by sleeping with her every night. And now he brings me to Curitiba and the first thing he tells me is that he's split up with his wife and is starting a new life, at 40, and each of his sentences was overflowing with happiness, a feeling inaccessible to those who write; I knew what he was going through, it really was good; after four marriages I knew what the moment after liberation was like, it was as if the world was beginning again after those drawn out traumatic experiences that we subject ourselves to for long periods of time obeying some kind of uncontrollable atavism, because he was in that exact moment, and may even have brought me here (and I accepted that ridiculous fee) just to tell me, to gloat, always with the excuse that he had my best interests at

heart *because you need it*, the son-of-a-bitch was capable of telling me. I took one last sip of water and felt a pang of acidity deep inside – I was taking too long to continue my speech, the spotlights in the auditorium hurt my eyes, I could barely see anyone beyond the already uneasy figures in the front row and the municipal novelist next to me also began to fidget, I realized – I could almost hear the gears of his brain working – that he was desperately wondering how to undo the knot I'd created with my weird silence, because my face couldn't have looked so great either. It seemed that until I'd resolved my problem with Cássio – my childhood friend's name – until I'd rid myself of him for real, killing him perhaps (and in three seconds I'd come up with an entire narrative about a writer who kills another and is unmasked by his inability to control his own happiness), I wouldn't be able to take a step forward, say a word, any one at all, that might open the gates and enable me to proceed with that tragedy – I was choking. In the darkness (I missed Cássio's wife, importuning him physically and mentally with her mere presence beside him in a bar, but now she wouldn't be there any more to play her role), the novelist, with a professional smile – he had experience in round tables, I noticed – took his microphone, which, of course, didn't work, then asked to borrow mine, gave it two little taps that exploded in the loudspeakers, made a supposedly funny gesture and finally put an end to that paralysis.

“Well, after an unusual introduction by Antonio Donetti, a wonderfully provocative topic for this evening, perhaps it's time to throw open the discussion to questions from the audience and...”

I could no longer see a thing, not even Cássio's happy smile; Cássio, single at 40, who would no doubt welcome me with open arms in some trendy restaurant and give me a bear hug – I leaned towards the novelist and whispered in the worst

voice I could muster: *I'm not feeling well. Maybe...* and there was a commotion of niceties, while part of the audience left grumbling, ten minutes to listen to that shit and then go home, and part sat there stunned, watching the whispering at the table, which was soon surrounded by busybodies; someone even asked if there was a doctor present, but fortunately there wasn't one to diagnose my fraud, and thus, feigning dizziness while gesticulating *don't worry, it's nothing*, I escaped through a back door that abruptly left me in a square, Largo da Ordem, the novelist behind me, genuinely worried – *We were thinking about going for dinner. Do you think...* – but I wormed my way free, *I'm going to look for a cab, a walk will do me good, I think it's my stomach, I*, and I told a few more lies, finally leaving him behind, almost sprinting away, dashing off in search of fresh air, until I was lying in the darkness of my hotel room, waiting for the phone to ring; now I desperately wanted to see him to measure *in loco* the pressure that was doing me in and the next moment – funny, time flew in that state of despair, and not the opposite, as narrative cliché would have it – the phone rang violently. *I know what you've been up to*, and there was a frankly cheerful laugh that spoke for itself and left me speechless: he was happy. *No*, I said, *you don't need to pick me up, I'll meet you at the restaurant, that's better*, because it occurred to me that he might promise me a lift, then leave me waiting in front of the hotel for two hours, and not turn up, as a kind of payback. So off I went to meet him, and if he wasn't there I'd sit and eat a nice dinner and we'd never speak again until the end of time, which would be liberating. But there he was, of course. That's why he'd brought me for that ridiculous talk that I'd forcefully hurled into the air and which was now beginning to come back down in my soul with all the force of gravity to crush me till the end of time. To speak is to reveal oneself; to write is to conceal, I thought when I saw him slowly stand

smiling behind a table swathed in half-light, next to the silhouette of a woman, and I froze. Instead of his hideous wife who was no doubt now taking care of their two small children, living off puny alimony payments because she didn't know how to do anything, I saw the face of a beautiful woman, a young woman, with short, straight, fair hair that was the oval frame of a calm, down-to-earth face, from whose smile emerged happy, white teeth as soon as I drew near, while she got up from the table with the liteness of a nymph – *Please, don't get up*, and I touched her hand with both of mine – *Cássio, it's so good to see you again*, and I vigorously shook his calloused hand to rid myself of the instantaneous memory of her skin, *Beatriz, this is my friend Beatriz*, and his smile was one of those high points in life that we will never get back again, I felt that this was the cliché he inhabited now; and the next minute the waiter was offering me the menu and asking something that I refused to hear in order to get a better look at Beatriz's eyes, *She owns an editorial agency, and she also translates from English, French and Italian*, which got a smile out of her, simulating an inhibition that may actually have been real, the gesture saying something like *oh come on, Cássio, don't exaggerate, I just* and he kept talking – I'll join them in some wine, I told the waiter so he'd leave – about Beatriz's qualities, and how he intended to introduce her to a new publishing house in São Paulo, *this girl's a gem*, and I immediately agreed, shocked at how stupid Cássio was for spoiling her in such a merciless and vulgar manner like that; but suddenly, soon after our toast I felt that that terrible source of unhappiness – seeing him so happy beside a gorgeous woman – was also its antidote, my elixir of youth, *stealing her from him*, which gave me a whole mission in life concocted in the few seconds following the toast in which I noticed the intensity of Beatriz's gaze, which I still hadn't translated, until I saw her, deliciously flustered, open her bag – while

Cássio went white, stuttering a sudden change of subject *But what exactly did you say at the talk, they called me, you* – and hand me an old copy of my first book, *The Photo in the Mirror*, deaf to any other subject.

“I was telling Cássio, I didn’t know he knew you personally. I love this book. I’ve read it three times. Could you autograph it for me?” she asked. And shyly recognizing her inopportune gesture: “It’s just that I don’t want to forget.”

“Of course, Beatriz!” And it was Cássio himself, seething with jealousy – which seemed absurd and thus even more ridiculous – who handed me a pen, because I’d fibbed and said I didn’t have one on me just so he’d have to complete the mechanical gesture of offering one, which I happily accepted, while writing a short dedication, under and inspired by Beatriz’s gaze, with his crappy ball-point. Cássio didn’t get a look-in – he’d faded into the background, never to emerge again, I calculated – I’d wrench Beatriz from his arms, and without much effort, a fine revenge, the redeeming kind; what a wonderful trip to Curitiba, I’d stay another month, a year, whatever it took, and it was Beatriz herself who gave me with all the cues, mesmerized by the memory of a book she’d read three times and which was now taking shape as if by miracle in my easy-going, friendly, smiling persona, before her very eyes, like a gift. *So you’re in the editorial business – that’s funny, I’ve been looking for a proofreader with a feel for literature, which is very rare, more than a proofreader, an interlocutor* – and she stared at me with such intensity at the mere idea – *someone I could use as a sounding board, more than just, you know?* *Sometimes, I look at a paragraph and I* – I could hear heavy breathing; it was Cássio, civilized, still struggling to keep up appearances, strong enough to play along with my cruelty for the sake of politeness – *Yes, Beatriz is brilliant, she* – but no one was interested in what he had to say anymore. *Of course, let’s talk, I’d love to, I* – and

Beatriz handed me her card, which was charmingly simple, *Beatriz, Editorial Assistance*.

“Shall we start tomorrow?”

“Yes, let’s!”

I finally opened the menu: fillet steak with garlic and oil, no, not today; fillet steak cooked in butter, medium rare, with a side salad. *Which was to be demonstrated*, I thought, before the new toast. Beatriz’s green eyes shone.

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