

214322

Fragment of a Letter by Camila Zito Lema

You know what they say, moving house is one of the most stressful things to do. In fact, I've just discovered it is in the top 5. However, do you know what? For me, it wasn't. I just finished moving and to tell you the truth it was a relief, an opportunity to decide what I needed and no longer had space for in my life. More than anything, I went through, selected, and organised, photos and papers. I also found a personal diary that I had written when I must have been around 6 or 7 years old.

I was given that diary the same summer I learnt to read. You would send me letters that you yourself had written but that were signed by different nature deities, partly as a bit of fun. It is a shame that we didn't have a video camera, only a camera for taking photos, and even that we didn't always have on us, or sometimes we did, but we wouldn't take as many photos as other families.

Now I am reading the diaries of Ricardo Piglia. Volume II begins with a scene in a bar – it couldn't be any other way – and there Piglia, who actually writes as Renzi (talking as himself, but pretending to be someone else, a bit like the heteronyms of Pessoa or your letters), says the following, which I will transcribe:

“A diary imprisons days and it is likely that this obsession with sorting has influenced human morals, Renzi told the barman smiling. I say so speaking for myself, he said, since I write a diary, and diaries only obey the progression of days, months and years. There is nothing else that can define a diary; not its autobiographical content, private confessions, not even the record of a person's life. Simply put, said Renzi, it is defined by the way in which its content is organised by the days of the week and the months of the year. This is all, he said, satisfied. One can write anything, for example, a mathematical sequence, or a laundry list, or even a meticulous account of a conversation in a bar with the Uruguayan man tending the bar, or in my case, an unexpected mixture of details or meetings with friends, or testimonies of lived experiences. You can write all of this, but it will still be just a diary and only if one makes a note of the date, the month, the year- any of these three ways of orienting oneself amidst the torrents of time.”

See how Renzi mentions the laundry list, and just the other day we were talking about “I have forgotten my umbrella.” We should return to this discussion; don’t you think? What a lot of fuss over a loose phrase, a note in the margin, in quotation marks, that sometimes makes sense, and sometimes doesn’t! The point is that interpreters try to re-establish the significant context of that umbrella, even though, of course, it is of no importance to him. The phrase is easy enough to understand, transparent even; somebody has something which they have forgotten. However, the truth is that the umbrella embodies a cultural fabric full of folds, whereby there is always room for hermeneutics, for interpretational and analytical operations.

In short, I think that we’ve all forgotten an umbrella at one time or another. It must be an experience shared by humanity, almost like writing a personal diary, a letter, taking a family photograph whilst on holiday, or watching a film.

What Renzi says about obsessive sorting left me thinking about how concepts, words, they are human ways of capturing, ordering and sorting the chaotic multiplicity of reality. I remember when I read “The Order of Things.” In the preface, Foucault admits that this book was born thanks to J. L. Borges who made him laugh with a passage from “a certain Chinese Encyclopaedia” that describes how animals are divided into a) belonging to the Emperor, b) embalmed, c) tame, d) suckling pigs, e) sirens, f) fabulous, g) stray dogs, h) included in the present classification, i) frenzied, j) innumerable, k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, l) et cetera, m) having just broken the water pitcher, n) that from a long way off look like flies.

It makes me laugh too. In addition, it highlights the arbitrary nature of language and its derivatives: categories, classifications, codes, selections. All fragmentary cuttings of a possible world. The centre and the margins.

In general, the same happens with a camera, with our memory and our oblivions.

I imagine (literally, I am picturing an image in my mind) of this family on holiday; the children playing, or the view from the train, the nature, the landscapes in summer, the landscapes in winter, and finally the city with its people, by day, by night, its monuments and its bustle, posters and lights.

A statue with a crown. There is also the river that crosses the city, the church (presumably the Seine and Notre Dame?) the white two-piece suits, parliament, the excavations, the dunes (like those of our childhood beach) the dead bodies, more children playing, a woman laughing – who could have been any one of us at one time or another – pigeons, a square, a camera that causes unease.

The truth is that what I do, by means of phenomenological experiment, is to complete the hiatus of your account of the image with my past experiences of the world, with the senses that recall other aspects of the things we experience and often forget.

We are all part of a constant anticipation of what is to come.

Sometimes I think, with some fear, of the moment when we will have to sort out and organize our family archive.

Actually, we will have to create it.

(‘Fragment of a Letter’ was written as part of an ongoing dialogue. This fragment was used as a sound-piece and is part of the video installation ‘214322’, presented at the Eye Filmmuseum Amsterdam in December, 2019).