

Who I Am and Why I Write

I'm asked to tell you who I am and why I write, and I don't like these two questions.

Saying who I am seems futile and unnecessary. When English people say, "My name is...", after which they tell you their name, they assume that the name is not what they are but, rather, just another attribute, a sign, something to represent them, a quick way to be understood. However, in Catalan, we tend to introduce ourselves with "*Sóc...*" (I am) and then saying our name. For quite a while now I've been thinking that this syntactic structure is tautological and wrong and there's no way it answers the question about who we are.

As an adolescent, I was given to making public declarations about my identity. Generous with adjectives, ideologies and proclamations, I told everyone who I was without their having to ask. All this emphasis probably helped to compensate for my identity problems which, at that stage, were considerable.

Nowadays, we've become familiar with slogans along the lines of "We are what we eat", "We are what we listen to" or, more generically, "We are what we consume". Personally, I'm inclined to believe that we are what we do, and not much more than that. In my case, the activities are quite wide-ranging. Since I don't come from an aristocratic family, I spend a good part of my life doing what my father called "earning a living". Then, after that, we'd have in variable order, the sentimental/ family sphere, friends, culture, travelling, imagination, dreams, biological maintenance activities, frivolities and so on. I were to divide my day into time strips, I'd obtain a graphic version of what I do, which is to say who I am. Writing would rarely occupy one of the first places. Although sometimes I'd like to have more time to write, I don't know if I'd like writing to become one of my main activities.

To answer the question of who I am is difficult because not only do I have the sensation that I am more than one thing, but also this being which I presumably am has changed so much over the passage of time that sometimes I wonder whether it might not have been more honest to change my name on more than one occasion. I don't know if some people are of a single mould or if they only pretend to be, or whether it just seems so to me. What I do know is that at times I envy them and, other times, I pity them. Right now, I'm not sure if I'd want to be like I think they are.

When asked why I write, my mind tends to go blank and even more so when people ask when I decided to become a writer. I have no recall of any moment of epiphany in which I became aware of what I wanted to be, or that would be a dividing line between my earlier confusion and this plan that would thenceforth mark my life. When I look back, I can't see any partition or any conscious decision. I only see myself reading and writing, not always, but with some regularity. Reading young-adult novels, leafing through encyclopaedias, devouring comics. Writing a diary, an essay, a story. Without knowing why, just limiting myself to doing it.

I find it very hard to convince people that they should read or write. I can't come up with any clear, persuasive, communicable reason, and neither am I sure that this should become a mission or categorical imperative. I don't believe that reading or writing

improves us, enables us to grow, or makes the world better. If I read or write it's because I like it, or it helps me, or I need to do it. I don't know but I might stop doing it one day and I'd like to believe that, if I did, my identity wouldn't change much. I understand that writing is not what I am, but one of the facets in which what I think I am is manifested.

Then again, I have the sensation that the answers to the two questions of who I am and why I write are linked. My intuition is that our way of being (at least in part) has some influence in the fact that we write. Perhaps our way of being (at least in part) is the answer to the question of why we write. Let me move on to the personal terrain since, in my case, some facts that explain what I'm like might also explain why I write (and while they might not have been sufficient for another person, they did contribute in my case, though I'm not sure whether they were decisive). Facts like being born at a time without electronic gadgets, growing up in a boring town, being the youngest child. Facts like tedium, loneliness, introversion. Facts like not being good at sports, the selection of obligatory readings, the books we had at home, the niceness of librarians, the friends I had, some of my teachers. Facts like laziness or inability to carry out all the things that came into my head. Whatever the case, at primary school I wrote a diary in Spanish, at secondary school I switched to Catalan and tried writing fiction, at university I met other students who wrote, and then I won a literary prize and published the first book.

Not even then did I have the sense that I was a writer, that I'd become something different from what I'd been. Rather, it was as if I'd developed a facet, one like others I had inside me. Yet the other facets didn't achieve the same results. I didn't spend so much time on them or they didn't turn out very well. My inclination towards writing happened slowly. I'm still surprised when I'm treated as if I'm a writer since, as I said, it's never been my main activity.

For me, writing is still an extension of living, an enriched, expanded, experimental living: one of life's extras. My characters are the lives I haven't lived, tentative developments, completions that annul each other. They don't come out of nothing but from some inner seed which, for whatever reason – lack of time, of conviction, or maybe because of circumstances – have not fully developed. This way, we'd obtain a whole lot of aspects which can be ranked and recombined all the way to infinity: the epicurean, the playful, the childish, the romantic, the analytical, the nostalgic, the routine, the obsessive the superficial...

I see each one of my fictional characters (and also the rejected ones and those who are yet to be born) as a partial response the questions of who I am and why I write. Before they become fiction, the characters are vague, mixed up together, without a clear, differentiated existence. It's when they're written that they become recognisable. If I knew why I write, I'd know who I am. If I knew who I am, maybe I wouldn't write.