

ENGLISH TITLE:

What One Loves

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Norberak maite duena

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Preface

“I write of the disappearance of our village of Fisteus, of the wonderful languages of our people and of our horses. I build the weapon of the poor.”

LUPE GÓMEZ

This is what I read in Lupe Gómez’s book of poems, *Camuflaxe (Camouflage)*. It said the weapon of the poor, the weapon of the poor in a pen on a white page. There lies happiness, good news, the weapon of the poor in words, in writing, to be read and imagined, to travel through time, to make its way to other times and places. Build the weapon of the poor, build the word and complete the sentence, depict it on the white page for others to read, say and reimagine.

I’ve been asked more than once by family, friends and colleagues why I don’t write about reading; since they’re readings I focus on with students, why have I never put what I’ve learned about literary conversations in a book?

I’ve never had the courage. I’ve never theorized much, not enough for a book. But yes, I’ve spoken for my colleagues or in schools or counseling centers about my experience with reading.

So why now? Why should I now, when my academic career is about to come to an end, collect my thoughts about reading in a book? Often, when I don’t know how to start, when I can’t think what to start with, I say that I digest things slowly. But now I have an incentive that I did not take notice of earlier. It took a long time for its flame to light, but in recent months its direction has become clear and it has begun its journey. For I would ask myself, “how can one know everything without getting old?” And yet, is now the time, when

my working years are coming to a close and I'm about to leave the workplace and the working environment? It's impossible to know how much anxiety and enjoyment I went through before I started writing my thoughts about reading and literature.

Hence, this collection of reflections now; hence, this small book. It holds no long or in-depth theories, only what I've absorbed over the years in conversations about books with students and young people.

Here are the details of our readings: what we read, how we read it, and what notions our readings inspired.

Over the last twenty years, I have come to see more and more clearly that the most essential activity of a teacher, especially in subjects related to language and the humanities – but in other subjects as well – should be reading. Reading and studying. I've often told my students that I go to school to learn, just like them. A good reader is above all a tireless learner. Good teachers, to engage their young students, must also have the desire to learn in the learning activity and must experience every day the joy that learning creates. Because that joy is seen and noticed by the people around them, and is contagious.

Learn and read, because how can you learn without reading and experimenting? How can you learn about the connection between what you read and life itself, those around you, and other areas of knowledge without bringing that interaction to light? Going to school, embracing schooling, is an excellent opportunity to learn and improve yourself, an opportunity to expand your mind. Within this opportunity, books are a window to the world, giving us occasion to interact, talk and debate with our reading partners. These conversations that we have with peers, students and teachers will help us to become women and men who are able to give their free and autonomous opinion, to acquire critical knowledge, and through this, to make humanity more human. Schools are places that should make us special, that should educate us to make independent decisions and make knowledge a constant critical activity. The development of a critical and free perspective can make an enormous difference in the life of

a young student, and this small miracle is repeated every day in meetings and conversations among readers.

Here, I would like to say that we begin reading among ourselves through dialogue and conversation, and especially by using whole books, since odd texts and adapted collections often offer nothing but the original texts.

So don't expect to find the same old literary criticism of books you've read here, but rather some reflections on the act of reading. There are no specific instructions on how to read or practice reading. Nor are there sets of exercises or suggestions for individual work, but rather an example of the concerns, opinions and thoughts that reading inspires in young and teenage readers. Here, you can see the preliminary steps brought about by readers' thoughts after some writing assignments, and perhaps it will be seen that no book is too difficult if it is read together, in a group or with fellow readers, if the notions and deep convictions inspired by the books are brought together.

Reader, you will find no suggested reading list here and there are no plans for any such thing. More than once I've thought that it might be necessary to have a canon or list of good and quality suggestions for readings for young people, and the not-so-young. But I now believe that that canon, that ideal list, should not be a solid block of marble, but a continuous flow of water, flexible, controversial and enriching. This could be the most interesting aspect of such a canon: that new writers who have not been on the list before could be included. That it could bring together current and timeless concerns, the individual and the universal.

On a weekday in February of 2020, when I was taking a coffee break from work, I heard a man sitting at the bar complain about the mid-morning news summary on television: "No good news ever!" He repeated the phrase twice, looking around as if seeking everyone's approval. And, probably influenced by the warm, light atmosphere of early spring rather than winter, I thought then that he was right to some extent, because there is not much happy news on television, and even less in today's post-pandemic climate of lockdowns and

uncertainty. Happiness does not make news. But I had Lupe Gómez's *Camuflaxe* in hand and the poem at the end of the book offered a clear contrast to the man's opinion. Following my long-standing habit, I had just read the poem to my students at the beginning of the previous study session: "*Constrúo a armas dos pobres.*"

Thus, at the beginning of the study session, the students and I talked about the power of writing and reading, about the power of reading to strengthen and reinforce reflection and knowledge. This is good news that can stand against the unhappy news on television: that this weapon of the poor does not require money, that it is given, offered, for free, and that this gift truly enriches both the giver and the receiver, because the giver loses nothing when he gives this gift and the receiver robs him of nothing when he takes his word. Such are dialogues and conversations about reading and literature: places of happiness and giving, because we are all enriched by offering words, opinions and suggestions, since this enriches speech, reason and reflection.

In the following writings, there is no reading guide, no list of features or firm conclusions that should be drawn from each book. They are simply the opinions and possibilities that we shared with each other during our readings and conversations, the rich gifts that teenagers and young students receive from reading materials. They are clear evidence of reading. Evidence that many read more than they think, that furthermore, many read better than they think, that many young people read in depth and meticulously, that they do not accept just any form of reading even though it may be easier and faster for them. These writings bear witness to the fact that they can read profound works. The weapon of the poor is in their hands!

Hamlet, the best is Hamlet

So says a colleague when we talk about the Universal Literature elective in the first year of high school. We've often talked about the books we read with students for this elective. And again and again, he repeats, "*Hamlet, the best is Hamlet.*" He says it fast, making the pronunciation of the name of the young Danish prince easier. With delight, breathlessly, "Hamlet," without elegance, approaching the prince and making him a peer. Hamlet, pedigree aside. Hamlet.

But what does *Hamlet*, Hamlet, bring us? An Ophelia perhaps. Young readers and students do not have much prejudice or prior knowledge at first. Some are familiar with the name of a girl who killed herself, perhaps for the lack of the prince's love... And some are also familiar with the best-known sentence in theater: "To be or not to be, that is the question."

There is a portrait of an Ophelia, perhaps not the most famous pre-Raphaelite image of dead Ophelia, floating on the river surrounded by lilies. No, there is another on display at the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum. This is also a portrait in the pre-Raphaelite style, Ophelia with a book in her hand, as if reading. We do not know what she's reading; the 1864 painting does not show the cover of the book. It does not appear to be a book of Mass services, but may be a "book of hours", as would have been common among women of her time. It could also be a book of poems, sonnets perhaps. It is likely that she tucked among the pages of that book the poem that Prince Hamlet wrote to her confessing his love:

Doubt thou the stars are fire;
Doubt that the sun doth move;
Doubt truth to be a liar;
But never doubt I love.

to read before starting her usual reading, to enjoy, to use as a bookmark. It may be a book that Prince Hamlet reads, for young Prince Hamlet is educated; he is a student at a foreign university.

We can see Hamlet also holding a book in many productions. This can be seen, for example, in Laurence Olivier’s film performance. And in the version with Mel Gibson. And we see it, to mention one last example, in Ernst Lubitsch’s film, *To Be or Not To Be*, when the jealous famous actor looks up at the sky with a book in his hand and says “To be or not to be!...” more and more harshly.

“To be or not to be...” may be the most literary expression of doubt. Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges said that doubt is a way of learning. And it could be that doubt pushes us to investigate, to find out. It arouses our curiosity. Doubt is a warm flame that sheds light on mysteries and secrets. It warms our insides and calls out to us again and again in a constant small shiver to take one more step in our knowledge. Following Simone Weil, we would say that doubt is a power of the mind and at the same time a need that enables us to move forward. Therefore, we can recognize the glorification of doubt in Shakespeare’s play, primarily embodied in its main character. Doubt as a means of arriving at knowledge, which imposes a strict critical approach to our reasoning as well. Doubt, not as a fatal weakness, but as protection against unhappy thoughts.

Hamlet experiences doubt at all times. He doubts that the ghost is his father, he doubts that his father is telling him the truth about the details of his death, he doubts his mother’s love for his father, he doubts Ophelia’s honesty... Doubt, finally, about his duty, about the legitimacy of the duty his father’s ghost requires of him.

When immersed in doubt, in an uncertain atmosphere like the one Hamlet experienced, in an unsettled atmosphere like the one we live in today, we must adopt a critical perspective and have empathy, because in itself, in its nature, the push forward necessarily entails the same doubt. Humans will always push themselves forward but discussion is essential in this, and today, with the uncertainty that surrounds us, both socially and in terms of true information, it may be difficult for us to perceive the future or the path we must take.

This is how the duplicity of the young prince's behavior is shown, because he clearly sees the doubt:

Whether tis nobler in the mind to suffer
the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
And by opposing end them

Because this particular dilemma involves another moral issue that goes hand in hand with the opposition between justice and revenge. The desire for certainty will always begin with doubt until testing leads to the possibility of putting into practice a hypothesis that will be confirmed later, that the prince of Denmark will get the killer by facing the dire circumstances of the death of the former king, using the small play within the work as a mirror of consciousness for that purpose. In this case, my young students, teenagers, steeped in the passion of Prince Hamlet, tend to go straight to the Old Testament and “an eye for an eye.” Influenced by the pain and passion of the young prince, each explains the position they would take in a similar situation, stating firmly that such a situation would be unbearable for them. Giving free rein to their imagination, they confirm again and again that the situation would be intolerable, with the vehement heat that reading the monologue brings at first. This is where I hear many statements along the lines of “it’s not fair.” – Ah! The pain of youthful honesty and righteous justice! – But at one point, my student Maddi L. declared, “That’s revenge, not justice.”

At such times, I sincerely regret not having a recording of the conversation available because I cannot record all the sessions. I didn’t take Maddi’s words down verbatim because I often stop taking notes to enjoy a student’s explanation. However, I would argue that I and many other teachers might not explain so clearly why this behavior is vindictive and unjust. Why wait until the fire of the answer cools and leave the responsibility of the decision or punishment to someone else. What ultimately makes us human, masters of all humanity, and separates us from beasts and from unthinking, abrupt responses?

Maddi's words have faded, as the replicant Roy said in the movie *Blade Runner*, "like tears in rain." But those of us who were there heard them as they were spoken, calmly and with full intelligence, and enjoyed them in their setting. We will not recall them in the future with the precision a recording would allow, but the clarity of that moment, the depth of reflection, the radiant calm of the situation, and our astonishment will never be lost in the rain.

I love you more...

It has not often happened to me when reading Homer's *Odyssey* that students in their third year of Compulsory Secondary Education choose a sentence from Book 16. This is what Juan Kruz Igerabide wrote in his translation and adaptation for the publishing house Erein:

Orduan Telemacok aita besarkatu zuen, negarrez. Biek egin zuten negar, luze, txoriek umeak kentzen dizkietenean baino gehiago.

(Telemachus hurled his arms round his father, and he wept. They both felt deep desire for lamentation, and wailed with cries as shrill as birds, like eagles or vultures, when the hunters have deprived them of fledglings who have not yet learned to fly.¹)

In Santi Onaindia's 1985 translation, the passage from Book 16 appears as follows:

226. Itzok esanez, jarri zan. Telemako'k besarkatu eban bere aita, zizpuru ta negar artean. Bi-biai etorri yaken negar gurea ta zaratatsu negar-egin eben, egaztiak –arranoak naiz erpa makurdun saiak–, baserritarrak, oraindik egaz egin ez daben kumak kentzen dautseza- nean egin oi daben baño geiago

The Spanish translation of the epic work also includes the rhapsodic sentences from Book 16. Translated directly from the Greek by Luis Segalá, the passage appears as follows:

Telémaco, abrazó a su buen padre, entre sollozos y lá- grimas. A entrambos les vino el deseo del llanto y lloraron ruidosamente, plañendo más que las aves, águilas o buitres de corvas uñas, cuando los rústicos les quitan los hijuelos que aún no volaban.

Carlos Riba adapted *Ulysses* for children and young people in 1986. In that adaptation, the passage appears as: "*I després de dir-ho el besà; i tots dos abraçats, sanglotaren d'alegria durant bella estona.*"

¹ English translation by Emily Wilson.

This version contains no mention of birds or their fledglings, unlike the above versions. I am well aware that when Juan Kruz Igerabide created his translation/adaptation, he kept in mind not only the Spanish and Greek translations, and Santi Onaindia's Basque translation, but also the translation by Carlos Riba, because it was exemplary among adaptations for children and young people. But Juan Kruz Igerabide follows a version in which birds appear, unlike Riba in the Catalan version, surely seeing the similarity to the well-known lines in an old Basque verse:

*Nik zu zaitut maiteago
txoriak bere umeak baino.*

(I love you more
than a bird loves its young.)

I took no particular note of that part of Homer's song when I read *The Odyssey* in Spanish when I was young. I didn't remember it. Nor did I when I reread it when I was about forty years old, nor in the first few years of reading Juan Kruz Igerabide's version. But the simple truth is that the more times you read the masterpiece, the more nuances you perceive. Such works do not suffer from fluctuations in popularity or ways of thinking. They carry the weight of generations on their shoulders, but they recreate the world around us with great authenticity. And as I reread it for the literary talks that began in the fall of 2014, the similarity between Homer's lines and the old verse appeared clearly before my eyes.

My student Frangeli M. chose to read it in the talk that fall...

*Orduan Telemacok aita besarkatu zuen, negarrez. Biek egin zuten negar, luze,
txoriek umeak kentzen dizkietenean baino gehiago.*

and began by explaining the context:

They're in a swineherd's hut, and it says that after Telemachus went looking for his father, he returned to the swineherd's hut and found him there. The

narrator is Homer, it's in the third person, and I found a comparison: “[they] wailed with cries as shrill as birds, like eagles or vultures, when the hunters have deprived them of fledglings who have not yet learned to fly.”

I chose this quote – Frangeli continued – because I was very touched when I read it because I like these things a lot and they bring back a lot of memories.

I emphasized the use of comparison and the similarity to the Basque verse, and I even sang the verse for them:

*Itsasoa laino dago
Baionako barraraino.
Nik zu zaitut maiteago
txoriak bere umeak baino.*

(The sea is foggy
Up to the shores of Bayonne
I love you more
than a bird loves its young.)

The students were a little confused, surprised, and even nervous. They're not very used to hearing their teacher sing in a serious lesson. They feel embarrassed but the teacher doesn't. The song is necessary because when the words are forgotten the melody brings back the memory of the childhood melody and intertwines a longing for the tune with the tenderness of an embrace between father and son.

The song gave me an excuse to mention that birds and their young are very frequent motifs in European culture and traditional literature, songs and oral poetry. We Basques are not very original in this, and perhaps the Greeks aren't either, because the feelings are ultimately universal, and the comparisons and similes used in traditional, rural or fishing settings are not often very different from one another.

There is a theory that provides a more in-depth explanation, but Frangeli wasn't thinking about it when she chose her passage. She chose it "because I've experienced a situation like this." After that, there was a brief conversation among the members of the group. Frangeli's father is in Nicaragua, where he stayed four years ago when Frangeli came to the Basque Country with her mother. In these four years, Frangeli has changed completely. She came to the Basque Country as a little girl of ten and she will be fifteen by the time she sees her father again. Her dress and appearance have grown and become more womanly, though her eyes and shy smile still retain the sparkle of a little girl. She flew over a great ocean to find a different country, culture and language, and has mastered the foreign words and sayings of the new language better than many of her classmates, so well that she grasps nuances and sweet expressions that many others do not perceive. Life experience helped her to identify with Telemachus from the beginning and to experience the encounter between father and son as if it were her own. This has allowed solidarity and empathy to arise naturally among the classmates, they have shown intense attention to the situation of an unknown peer and there is also now a strong sisterhood among girls who until then had no close friends. There was immediate curiosity regarding how her relationship with her father works: do they talk on the telephone, do they use Skype to see each other...?

In this regard they immediately grasped what their teacher often said about books and stories in books: that a good book, novel, story, literature has the power to show the whole world; that they can find a whole life in the pages of a book. A month ago, in the newspaper *El País*, Luis García Montero, poet and president of the Cervantes Institute, said that everything is in the classics: wonder and beauty, lofty ambition and chasms. And J. M. Coetzee also wrote that "the classic is what survives" even the worst brutality because human generations cannot leave it behind and must pass it on one way or another. In the classics, in Homer, everything can still be seen, even if it is seen over a distance of years. What Ulysses and Telemachus experienced is still in our country, still in our homes.

My student Iñigo R. brought to our conversation situations in the 21st century that are similar to Ulysses' comings and goings and problems. Today, students see such problems as far away, but in 2011, when Iñigo R. took the floor, they still lived in the minds of some of the students. After all, Bermeo, on the other side of Mount Sollube, is only eleven miles from our town and many of us have relatives and friends in the town with the shipyard that build the Alakrana. Although Iñigo R. had previously shown himself to be a fan of mythology and fantastic characters, he did not mention them this time. He remembered his father, who was working on a tuna boat fishing around the Seychelles archipelago. The Alakrana and the dangers of the sea were very much present in his home every day while his father was on security duty on the ship for four long months. His Penelope and Telemachus were in the Basque Country in 2011, suffering the same anxieties that Homer's characters had experienced some thirty-two centuries earlier.

I've often mentioned to my students that, even though today all the seas and coastlines of the world are very well known and are precisely drawn and mapped, the sea can become a place of danger when we least expect it, because of changes in the water, because the boat could have a problem or accident, or because of conflicts between boats. The battles that Ulysses fought during his long journey, with the Laestrygonians, the Cyclops, angry Poseidon, and the inhabitants of other Mediterranean coasts, could still take place today in the great waters of the wide world.

As we were reading about Ulysses' adventures, we often recalled the hijacking of the Alakrana on October 3, 2009, 413 miles off the southern coast of Somalia. Some of the students, most of them, were not familiar with the event, they never heard anything about it. It's difficult for them to connect these attackers with the pirates they've read about in *Treasure Island* or seen in the movies. Perhaps pirates have a very "romantic" image. But that's what the internet is for, to hear the story of the attack straight from the mouths of those who lived through it. With a simple click, they can hear the testimony of the Alakrana's kitchen assistant in the vivid images they love so much.

These episodes from life, which strikingly reveal the sensitivity of the speakers, often bring another issue to the table: the desire to clarify the identities of these “Ulysses” we can see around Europe in the current situation. I’ve often expressed my concern, and the responses have been different from time to time. The young people understand that Ulysses’ journey is a metaphor. For some, it portrays the passage of life, full of obstacles, and shows that one must fight to reach the destination. My student Leire R. said that it is the ideal within the real. Could we call Frangeli M. Ulysses or Odysseus then? Has she made such a daring journey? No one would deny that it takes courage to go through with such a change, to start a life on the other side of the world and move forward. And she will repeat that Odyssey in a few months when she goes to see her father.

Stepping slightly outside the pages of the book, I asked the students participating in the talk whether there are any Odysseys that exist today, not counting the cases of Frangeli or Johan S. M. When answering this question, the students’ minds turn to the many migrants who travel across the Mediterranean in dinghies and small boats and land exhausted and half dead on the shores of Europe, as some of those who arrived by boat have become their schoolmates. But in 2014, with the vicious economic crisis still weighing on our minds, my teenage interlocutors were thinking about young alumni who had just finished their studies only to be hit by severe unemployment and who had to go abroad, go north, to find work. They saw the crisis and unemployment as the drivers of these new Odysseys. The nineteen-day Odyssey of the ship Open Arms was painful news in the summer of 2019. I heard again the opinions of my students from five years earlier. In their opinion, the experiences of young people who go abroad to find work, even after years of hard work, will toughen and strengthen the new Odysseis and enrich their lives. They have no doubt about this. In contrast, the case of those who landed on Lampedusa after nineteen long days is not so clear to us. Would this experience truly enrich the lives of these new Odysseis from the African continent?