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María Luisa Puga Heroine of Writing

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María Luisa Puga lived most of her 60 years feeling like an outsider, as though she inhabited places without belonging to them. In the trips she made around the world, she was never alone. She was always accompanied by her diaries, countless notebooks into which she poured her writing to explain reality to herself.

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She wrote in them with intensity and discipline, without pretexts to interrupt her craft or postpone the moment of creation. Her routine, which she maintained even through illness, sleepless nights or pain, consisted of getting up every day, including weekends and holidays, at 4 a.m. to sit before her blank page.

She visited European, African and Mexican cities. Finally, she settled in a cabin in the middle of a forest on the banks of the Michoacán

lake of Zirahuén. There, across from Esteban, the immense tree visible from her studio window, she shared her circumstances, her way of understanding silence, her perception of the social situation and human feelings that were woven into the last third of her literary work.

She was born in Mexico City's Anzures neighborhood in 1944, but her earliest childhood memories were from Acapulco and Mazatlán. Her only childhood fantasy was to become a writer. While she read romantic Corín Tellado stories, she wrote her own in which she and her sister were the heroines.

Then she came upon *The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank and she began to keep her own personal diary where she put together the feelings that ran through her life.

"It is as though that diary were my mama, whom I run to when I need to tell her everything that people do to me," said Puga many years later to justify the physical presence of the diary that, with the passage of time, had become thousands of notebooks papering the walls of the house she lived in.

In April 1968, Puga left Mexico City for Europe. There, she traveled through different countries for 10 years; she had a romantic breakup and economic problems that pushed her toward the capital of Kenya, Nairobi.

There she wrote *Las posibilidades del odio* (The Possibilities of Hatred), a novel that narrates the forms of identity that originate in colonialism, as well as the abuses and corruption of the ruling class, in a story that brutally lays bare the injustices of the Third World.

In Nairobi, said Puga, "I saw the reality I grew up in as a child: the reality of hunger, injustice and unlimited luxury. I discovered that in Nairobi, I was the corrupt one, the powerful one, the one who could get away with anything. That is why I wrote my first novel. Yes, in hatred and rancor, there are creative, not vengeful, possibilities."

Then, with her novel written, Puga returned to Oxford, where she ran into an old friend who was returning to Mexico to turn in a manuscript to the Siglo XXI Publishing House. Puga gave him her own, and in 1978, *Las posibilidades del odio* was published. It caused great expectation among writers and critics who considered the theme somewhat exotic, but above all, who praised María Luisa Puga's precise, fluid writing style.

Puga returned to Mexico intent on beginning a career in letters and "aspiring to having the influence of Virginia Woolf and the depressing air of Elías Canetti in my literature."

Upon returning, she almost immediately joined the Mexican Communist Party and ran for alternate deputy in her electoral district. Two years later, having separated herself from political activism,

she published *Cuando el aire es azul* (When the Air Is Blue), a novel based on the Cuban people, about a utopian society located in an isolated landscape where the air is blue, there are 28 hours in a day and people have managed to develop coherently socially and economically.

Later she published two books of short stories that consolidated her important rise in

Mexican letters: *Immóvil sol secreto* (Immobile Secret Sun) and *Accidentes* (Accidents). An untiring writer, Puga discovered in short stories a respite from writing novels: "I write my short stories at the same time that I work on a novel and it is a kind of rest from it. Something different and refreshing. While writing a novel, I feel the need to throw something out and I do it by writing a short story."

Puga had already found a voice of her own, which consisted of making her characters speak subject to their circumstances, in a mix of autobiography, fiction and reflection, always with a certain sadness and nostalgic surprise with which she perceived the painful reality of the eminently masculine world it fell to her to live in. In her

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literature, there is profound concern for social issues that by that time she had managed to separate from political activism.

In 1982, she published *Cuando rinde el horno* (When the Kiln Bears Fruit), an interview-portrait about the ceramics of Hugo X. Velásquez. After this essay written in a single night, for the first time, María Luisa Puga felt like a real writer. That year, she worked as a proof reader at the Siglo XXI Publishing House, she began to give literary workshops, and received the 1983 National Prize for a Novel for *Las posibilidades del odio*.

It was in that same year in one of her workshops that she met the man who would be her partner until her death, Isaac Levín, who had been a business executive for multinationals, a consultant for the U.S. government and an auditor in Costa Rica, and who gave it all up to write short stories. He attended Puga's workshop and they decided to go through life together in literature, the only way in which María Luisa could explain her presence in the world.

"I write to understand and to touch. All people have different ways of living and of feeling an active part of the world. Writing is one of those ways. If I don't bring the things I see to my writing, I feel like I have been left out. By writing them I make them real and I can touch them."

In 1984 she was operated on for a back problem and as she convalesced, closed up in her room and almost without being able to move, she once again escaped from her reality by writing. This is how the novel *Pánico o peligro* (Panic or Danger) came about, in which she narrates in the form of a diary the story of three close friends and their growth in a trip down Insurgentes Avenue in Mexico City.

"The novel's characters are myself and nobody," Puga would explain. *Pánico o peligro* is the constant struggle of Mexico City inhabitants to make sense out of their actions, the concerns of a "colo-

nized middle class" and the feelings of a class of bureaucrats who let themselves be manipulated, exchanging their identities for stability.

Pánico o peligro won Puga the Xavier Villaurrutia Prize for that year and contributed to her being recognized as one of the great writers of Mexican literature.

She resumed her literary workshops. She was invited to lecture about women and letters and the social role of women; she headed up literary events, and in 1985, together with Mónica Mansour, made a tour of rural towns in the northern part of the country. When she came back to the city, Puga was shocked. "Literature does not exist in the rural areas. They don't know who Elena [Poniatowska] or [José] Agustín are; they don't know who Rulfo is..."

Then, she decided to use all the fora she could and began to quite rightly criticize the country's cultural policy and education. "It seems like cultural projects have the aim of showing us the culture that other peoples produce so we can learn it, not just get to know it. Not to enrich ourselves with it, but to submit to it."

Closer to cultural events and literary workshops, María Luisa felt that she was distancing herself from her commitment to writing. At Isaac Levín's suggestion, she abandoned her social commitments, left Mexico City and changed urban noise for the silence of the forest. She left for a cabin built by her partner on the banks of Zirahuén Lake. Levín also built a little hardware store to pay for living expenses. The reason she decided to abandon life in the city: "I did it for love. I say that in a low voice because some people believe it's not a very serious argument."

In her life in the countryside, Puga continued with her work discipline and made it even stricter. Little by little, she adapted to the silence of the forest. In the beginning, she scared off loneliness with many mirrors that she put up in her study to

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fight off the silence with her own reflection. Then, little by little, she replaced the mirrors with internal images: “While writing, but above all at the moment you sit down to write, there is an anxiety, some that makes you suffer, but just as writing has its bad moments, it has other fantastic ones. The best is when you forget you’re writing; you’re writing, but it is no longer you, no longer your hand, your computer, your pen, but the story is being told through you.”

In 1987, *La forma del silencio* (The Shape of Silence) was published, which Puga had written from her cabin and in which she expounds on the importance of silence as the central axis of today’s society, in perpetual crisis.

“Things are destructured: the couple, the family, society, the country. Everything collapses in a torrent of useless, increasingly specialized, words; words that are drier and drier and more and more incomprehensible, more distant from human feeling. In the 1940s the war shook the world. In the 1950s, plastic filled it with hope. In the 1960s it was love. In the 1970s, death made its appearance once again. In the 1980s, crisis. The words sound as if they had already been said, already been tested out, already failed. Human beings continue to be as vulnerable as ever.”

Far from the activities of the country’s cultural centers, María Luisa Puga surrounded herself with

literature and continued firmly committed to literature and society in her way. She divided her time between Isaac Levín, her dogs with their evocative names (Comma, Period, Novel, Story), her notebooks and the literary workshops she gave to children and adolescents in the town’s school.

“I went to live in Zirahuén because I wanted to organize my own austerity, live in voluntary, controlled poverty that would allow me to see the process of the country’s crisis. I have managed to find a way to sustain myself and fight for people to develop a more critical spirit for analyzing the crisis. What I picked was a space to write in, not to be a successful writer. It would get in the way to be too well known because I would stop hearing my writing and I would begin to hear my image.”

In her quest to find different points of view for telling stories, Puga wrote about the circumstances of her life and the world around her, delving into the minds and concerns of different characters.

In one of her best written books of short stories, *Intentos* (Attempts), she explores the sudden arrival of death (“Una, dos, tres por mí” or “One, Two, Three for Me”); its equally unexpected appearance for someone who thinks about it without really knowing its basis (“Malentendidos” or “Misunderstandings”); the childish blindness that leads to selfish cruelty to the unknown (“Nuevos caminos” or “New Roads”); the unconscious theft of a

manipulated girl (“Lucrecia”); the mind of a middle class woman with a dysfunctional family (“¿Te digo qué?” or “Should I Tell You What?”)

Later she published “Antonia,” which deals with the relationship of two women who were childhood friends and their journey through Mazatlán and London in a trip that takes Antonia, a young woman full of life, to her death from breast cancer.

In “Las razones del lago” (The Reasons of the Lake), Puga recreates the town of Zirahuén from the viewpoint of a pair of decrepit dogs who wander among the women washing clothes on the banks of the river.

“La viuda” (The Widow) reveals the terrible problem of being a submissive woman and what happens when she finds new freedom on the death of her husband. The story came from the time when a woman very close to Puga lost her husband and during the funeral uttered a single sentence: “I’m tired of being the queen mother.”

Next came “La reina” (The Queen), the story of a tremendously beautiful young woman, tormented by the sordidness of her surroundings, and “Inventar ciudades” (Inventing Cities), the story of an orphan girl who must leave the city to go to live with two old people in the provinces.

“Nueve madrugadas y media” (Nine and a Half Early Mornings), her most autobiographical story, is a long dialogue that takes place at the time suggested by the title between a young male writer and a mature woman writer about the processes of creation.

In a corner of the text, María Luisa Puga makes reference to an event that would have important consequences for her but that she preferred not to mention: one morning in 1995, she was kidnapped from her cabin. While she was being led through the forest by her captors, she fell down several times, which led her to suffer from rheumatoid arthritis, which combined with the pulmonary emphysema caused by her constant smoking.

In 2002, she suffered from the effects of the arthritis and was rendered practically immobile, confined to a wheelchair that she had painted red and that was pushed everywhere by Isaac Levín.

To fight the pain, María Luisa Puga resorted to her best escape: she wrote about her relationship with the suffering and made it a character in her life. She evaded the fear of breaking her joints with the pen and thus emerged *Diario del dolor* (Diary of Pain), the last book she would publish, which consists of 100 small fragments about that relationship with Pain, an ever-present character.

The book comes with a compact disc that brings the reader Puga’s voice reading the story. It has been taken to the Ministry of Health’s pain clinics as part of the therapy for dying patients.

On the day it was launched, Puga said about *Diario del dolor*, “I began to write to get it all out, until the presence of pain began to be something that was always there with me. I told myself, ‘If I am locked in here with it, well, it’s locked in here with me, too. It is not going to be able to leave.’”

In December 2004, just when she was beginning to walk again with the help of a cane or a walker, in one of the routine check-ups for which she traveled to the city, the doctors discovered too late an advanced case of cancer in her ganglia and liver. Three weeks later, she died on Christmas Day at 3 p.m. in Mexico City’s Nutrition Clinic. She left two more incomplete novels in which pain played a primary role in the story.

Her innumerable notebooks that she was so devoted to were left in the care of her friend Elena Poniatowska.

Her last request was to be cremated and have her ashes buried at the foot of her tree Esteban, across from the cabin that held her collection of video tapes, the memory of a shipwrecked sailboat and the love professed for her until the very end by her inseparable partner Isaac Levín. ■■■

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