

SPEECH FOR APPOINTMENT AS HONORARY DOCTOR

Vigo University. 28 January 2013

Sr. Rector Magnificus,
Sr. Minister for Culture, Education and University Planning,
Sr. President of the Social Council
Sra. Vicerector of Students, Culture and Sport from the University of A
Coruña,
Sr. Vicerector of Academic Policy from the University of Salamanca,
Members of the University Community,
Doctor Julio Casado Linarejos,
friends:

I know that the recognition with which the University honours me today, and which makes me feel such emotion, is not related to my possible merits, despite the words of praise from my patron, Doctor Xosé Henrique Costas, doubtlessly guided by appreciation and generosity. A generosity for which I must similarly thank the members of the Galician and Latin Language Department, who are responsible for proposing my nomination, and the representatives from the Government Council, who approved the proposal and made it their own. From my heart, my deepest gratitude.

The fact this is happening at the University of Vigo, the city in which I have lived for more than twenty years, fills me with joy. Vigo fascinated us, received us with open arms; we feel its affection every day. We are lucky to participate in the endeavours of this city of salt, this bankside bee, as Manuel Bragado calls it. Our University regaling me with this recognition today, unites me even more to this institution, to Vigo and to its citizens.

The scarce merits that I can contribute are related to my labour in literary creation, especially to that aimed at young people, and to the work around the promotion of language in teaching and in society. That is why, in the necessarily brief speech I am going to read, I address some aspects of my biography connected to these lines of work. I have entitled it "Six memories and a narration".

SIX MEMORIES AND A NARRATION

SIX MEMORIES

I REMEMBER the world's creation, which began when I saw the light for the first time in the spring of 1947. As I grew up, the world disclosed itself around me, in the prodigious process which gets underway each time a person is born. The landscape of my childhood was that of Vilalba in the icy 'fifties. A society where the passing of the seasons marked the rhythm of life: the collective labours, the childhood games, the cycle of the harvests. A chunk of foggy and leaden Galicia, above which hovered fears and silences, something I ignored back then.

We accepted the granite-like diglossia which had settled into society as if it belonged to the natural order of things. The parish priest, the teachers, the artists from cinema, or the doctor spoke Castilian, the same language we read in the papers or the comics, or that we heard on the radio. The language for formal uses, because real life unfolded in our language. The language of games, of family, of work, of affection, was Galician.

It was also the language of the oral narrations which I listened to, fascinated, without knowing that those stories established the first cement of the passion for words which would end up leading me to writing and converting me into a storyteller too.

I REMEMBER the books I read. I never forget that, as well as being a writer, I am first and foremost a reader. The son of another passionate reader, as my father was. With him I took the first steps on the path which has led me here today. A path extended over so much time that it allows me to speak of the enormous changes which society and the appreciation of reading have undergone. Like Roy Batty from Blade

Runner, I can also state that “I have seen things which you wouldn’t believe”. At least in this respect, those of my generation have been fortunate, as we have been present in the stage which goes from 1945 to these first years of the 21st century, that which Ignacio Ramonet calls “that of the grand transformations”. One of these transformations is in reading, orphan of public policies which recognise the vital function it performs.

If during childhood we settled for reading what we had to hand, in the adolescent or young adult years, I longed to access authors of whom I had heard echoes, but who couldn’t be found because the censorship was brutal, freedom of expression a utopia and they silenced voices who could reveal other paths to us.

If reading is always a conquest which needs years to settle, it was even more so for people of my generation, condemned not to read, or to do so at the wrong time, the authors who renovated the vision of the world in the 20th century. Castelao, Sartre, Machado, Joyce, Camus, Kafka, Beckett... Yes, I went hungry for books. A situation which markedly contrasts with the current one, where censorship is practised in much more refined media.

Times they were a-changing, as Bob Dylan announced in 1963, and life placed indelible titles in my hands, books which exploded like a supernova inside me and changed me forever. Along with Borges, I can also state “I am the books that I have read”.

I REMEMBER the unforgettable discovery that there were books written in Galician. In the Vilalban childhood – all of us steeped in the spoken Galician context of oral practice – we believed that writing was reserved for the Castilian which they spoke to us in church, in school or on the radio.

Until one day when I was eight, my father arrived home with two books in his hands. With the entire family seated at the kitchen table,

with the oilskin cloth well-cleaned so as not to dirty them, Papa showed us the marvel he had brought: two books written in Galician, *Merlín e familia* ('Merlin and Family') and *Á lus do candil* ('By Candlelight'). Sr. Crende had lent them to him, a bookbinder who was a good friend, a man dedicated to the precarious publications from Galaxia, the publisher which members of the Galician Party in the interior had just created.

My father read us some pages out loud, which we listened to with a similar emotion to that of the first European who saw black swans in Australian territory. Beyond the brief amusing texts which appeared in *El Progreso* by San Froilán or some verses from local poets who were included in the programme of the local festivals, there were real books in our language!

I know that other people were luckier and grew up alongside the Galician books printed before 1936, or had access to the works published by those exiled in Argentina and Mexico, which arrived here by furtive means. I did not. That was my epiphany and was followed in my adolescence by the emotion of reading the *Cantares gallegos* ('Galician Songs') in an edition buried in the Gijon Trade University library. The great Rosalía, without intermediaries, revealing her genius and showing me the way.

Much later other books would arrive, tinted with a clandestine halo, and also the typewritten papers, which circulated with poems whose authors' names did not even appear. Only later on, remembering them, did I know that they belonged to Celso Emilio, to Méndez Ferrín, to Novoneyra and so on. And then, as the 'sixties were drawing to a close, I witnessed their precarious presence in the bookshops and felt the emotion with which we bought them. It was in those years that my decision to write in Galician was formed, the intuition that the path dense with the thickest brambles was that

which I wanted to follow. But that is another story, which we have not time for here.

I REMEMBER the poem *Penélope* by Díaz Castro, from the *Terra Chá* like myself, each time I reflect upon the social situation of our language during the past decades. “Un paso adiante e outro atrás, Galiza / e a tea dos teus soños non se move.” (“One step forward and another backwards, Galicia / and the fabric of your dreams does not move.”) From the last years of the ‘seventies, my generation had a leading role in the labour of disseminating and giving social prestige to the language. Through our daily work, quite a number of us dedicated a substantial part of our lives to this endeavour. In the classrooms, in the social ambits in which we moved, with our writing and the creation of magazines, or with the innumerable talks in any place to which we were invited.

What a lot of work! What a lot of energy we expended in erecting the simple building which would allow us to dream of a better future! In 2004, when the Galician government called us to create the General Plan for the Normalisation of Language, later endorsed by the entire Parliament, many of us believed it was possible to add another floor to the building in the near future.

It was not to be, as we know. For a few years, we have uneasily witnessed the miniscule process of the building’s disassembly. With the excuse of the crisis, or without it, legal setbacks appear regularly. The final objective seems very clear: prune the most vigorous branches of the bonsai, restrain the social presence of the language until it is confined to a subordinate place.

A reflection on the public education system would lead us to conclusions as disturbing as the last one. This reality hurts me intimately, not just as a citizen, not just as a teacher as I was for many years, not just as a Galician writer. How difficult it is to build, how

much work is implied to make progress, and how easy and quick it is to demolish!

Sometimes one feels the temptation to toast “To broken hopes. To the world which did not change despite our dreams”, like the protagonist in *Ulysses’ Gaze*, Theo Angelopoulos’ lucid film. However, like that which moved Penelope and finally was realised with the arrival of Ulysses at the coast of Itaca, fortitude and hope in the future always walk with us.

I REMEMBER my fiction books in particular, out of all the books I have written. In his *Carta de batalla por Tirant Lo Blanc* (‘Tirant Lo Blanc’s Battle Letter’), Vargas Llosa states that each narrator is God’s supplanter and each narration, the story of a deicide. As Wislawa Szymborska wrote: “here, black on white, other laws govern”.

Both quotes are very apt for this obsessive and solitary work of creating worlds and giving life to characters, employing words as the only material. Obsessing over a story, letting yourself be possessed by it for months while the process lasts. Polishing what is written over and over again in search of the text which is capable of awakening multiple resonances in the readers, even in the youngest ones.

Writing as an act of rebellion, as an act of love. Writing with the intense desire to create something which did not previously exist. Writing with the same commitment that my father had when he made a table or a wardrobe. Being conscious that we “plough over the dead bodies of this earth”, that our writing is nourished by the authors who came before us, first by those who wrote in my language, but also by those from universal literature. Knowing that what comes from afar passes through me, through us, and projects itself into the future.

This is my way, our way of participating in the culture of humanity. The most significant trait of Galician culture, which the members of the We Generation expressed so accurately, is our

vocation to be cells of universality; the willingness to be one more piece in the global mosaic of cultures; the awareness that one can only be universal through the assumption of one's own roots.

I REMEMBER Inmaculada, my wife who is here with me today, and Mariña, my daughter, in every moment. I owe them both a great deal, they are the pillars which support me, they are what gives my life meaning.

And I remember my roots. My parents, who made all kinds of sacrifices so that I could study. My brother, who died young, and my sister, and the whole extended Vilalba family: those from Louzao, those from Novo, those from Xan de Grande. I come from them and from them I learned the essential truths which guide me in life. A life which "as long as it may be, will always be brief", as a verse from the Polish writer Wislawa Szymborska states.

Of course it will be, but it will also be rich in experiences. Now I remember the friends I have made along life's path. They give me the best thing a person can possess: disinterested friendship. As Aquilino Iglesia Alvariño wrote, when I was still a boy, "Quero contar un por un meus amigos / (...) poucos ou moitos, meus amigos son / quero contalos no meu corazón»

("I want to count my friends one by one / (...) a few or many, they are my friends / I want to count them in my heart").

... AND A NARRATION

THE STRANGE MECHANISMS OF MEMORY

I always heard it said, and I have even read it in a book, that in the brief moments before death, one's whole life passes at great speed before one's eyes. This allows one to relive, for the last time, the

experiences – some bitter, others happy – which the memory has buried with a geological patience over the years.

Such a phenomenon, upon which I have meditated sometimes, must obey a strange order programmed into some sequence in the helical curve of our DNA, something like a consolatory divine version of the machine which Adolfo Bioy Casares imagined in *La invención de Morel* ('Morel's Invention').

But some agent must have altered the sequence to start up the complicated mechanism because, in the final seconds of life, his memory anchored firmly on the luminous image of Laura, the girl with honey eyes and blond plaits he had loved so much in his teenage years.

And with her came the music, as impetuous as the water which pelts down with the torrent. The music from that forgotten song, which returned with all its evocative power; the same one which was playing when he and Laura kissed with contained emotion for the first time. While the music inundated every corner of his memory, colours appeared sharply: the red of his friend's skirt, the blond of her plaits which he had caressed so many times, the intense green of the oak leaves, the orange glow of the sky at sunset, the honey colour of her eyes which he had never managed to forget.

Then he understood that when one's whole life passes, the only thing which is left in our hands is the memory of the happy moments, the reminder of the handful of experiences which stirred our hearts into a frenzy on joyful days.