

4. SPEECH BY IMMA MONSÓ, CATALAN WRITER

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Firstly, I should like to say how much I appreciate the honour that has been extended to Catalan culture by the organisers of the Fair through this invitation. At the same time, I want to express my appreciation of the honour of having been asked, as a writer, to represent my colleagues on this occasion. But, as writers, we are not usually too pleased to have someone else speak in our name, and so I shall certainly refrain from using the first person plural or from using expressions such as "we Catalan writers" because to speak in the name of "we" or "us" seems to me to be rather more pretentious and misleading than speaking in one's own name. Besides, does this "we" really exist?

As Catalan writers, are we essentially peripheral and is that what defines us? Do we feel profoundly influenced by the tradition of the literature that has been produced in our country? Or is what defines us the fact that we write in just one language, Catalan? I shall try to comment on what I understand by Catalan literature and explain why none of these definitions work for me.

NOT ALL OF US EXPERIENCE THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE CENTRE AND THE PERIPHERY IN THE SAME WAY

I will begin with the subject of the periphery. I belong to one of those cultures that are called "peripheral", with all the confusion that that implies in our contemporary globalised world where each periphery is a periphery of a centre that, in turn, is a periphery of another centre. That's just what being a Catalan writer means. And I know this because on many an occasion, all over the world, I have been invited to take part in discussions and round tables, talking for an interminable number of hours with writers from various different peripheries about what it means to write from the periphery. To the best of my recollection, we have never reached a satisfactory conclusion. But what I do recall is that peripheral writers are often inclined to colour the discussion by somehow seeing themselves as the victim; we are, in many ways, victims of the power of a "centre", and so we are subjected to centripetal and centrifugal forces that either draw us in until we are assimilated or push us out, but without entirely letting us go.

They are right, those Catalan writers who feel they are being wronged; literature written in Catalan has suffered from severe interference and any manner of setbacks. The Catalan language, a language that is almost one thousand years old and which is presently spoken by more than eight million people, has passed through periods of silence and repression, the latest of which, during the latter stages of Franco's dictatorship, was experienced first hand by the writers of my generation. We have had to, and we still have to, overcome a series of obstacles that hinder the dissemination of our work because many of the

mechanisms that enable our works to reach the rest of the world pass through the filter of the State, and our State is at the centre, not at the periphery.

All in all, the grievances are real, and those who like to sow the seeds of bitterness make sure that the grievances are kept alive.

But I speak as one who loves literature and, as a lover of literature, I would say that there is nothing more tedious than insisting on living off the dividends generated by a victim mentality. All over the world I have seen how writers from many different peripheries create literature that is full of life, and how they manage to make the best of the forces that tug them one way or another. In my country there are also many writers among us who do not feel the pressure from the centre to be a dead weight on what we do. It is a burden that has failed to prevent the creation of a solid literary tradition that is currently taught in many universities around the world.

At the peripheries we like to think of how great our literature would have been if we had been at the centre. Undoubtedly it would have been different – for better or for worse. Because, since culture has always been nurtured by individuals who obstinately fight against a reality that others wish to impose on them from outside, it is thanks to adverse conditions and to the struggle of individuals that we have such interesting names as those from the literature of exile. Would we have Mercè Rodoreda's great work if she had not decided to transform the melancholy of exile into literature? Would Pere Calders' intelligent irony (its imprint can clearly be seen in Quim Monzó's fine work) have been the same if it were not suffused with the Mexico where he went to live in order to flee the oppressive regime? And, talking of an author who fully connects with the younger generation, would the clear and incisive style of Sergi Pàmies be the same if he had not been born and brought up in Paris?

NOT ALL OF US FEEL THAT WE ARE CHILDREN OF JUST ONE TRADITION

The reality of our situation today is many-faceted, and is becoming ever more so. In the same way as elsewhere, relationships in our country are transcultural, and the identities we take on become more numerous with each passing year. Mind you, that is not to say that ours is or should be a literature that is "cosmopolitan" – what a ghastly word; a cosmopolitan person is somebody who feels the world is 'their home'. But the world is not a home, one cannot "feel" the world, it is an entity that is far too abstract and far too cold, one cannot love the world. And literature is a question of love. So, the likes and loves that have made Catalan literature what it is are diverse indeed. Even limiting myself to just what has happened since the end of the dictatorship, things are extremely complicated.

There are writers who feel more strongly influenced by the literature of the centre, even to the extent of writing much of their work in Castilian Spanish; these include such well-known names as Terenci Moix and Vázquez Montalbán.

On the other hand there are writers who were born in Aragon, outside the borders of Catalonia, but who write in Catalan; for example, those from the border region of La Franja such as Jesús Moncada and Mercè Ibarz, who have given us such splendid books.

There are writers who were not even born in Spain itself but in the area known as Northern Catalonia, which is actually in France, and they feel more comfortable writing in Catalan and being part of that tradition.

And then, there are writers like me who have been exposed to a strong French influence, and we have been more affected by the French "centre" than the Spanish "centre"; there are many narrators among us who carry the deep imprint of French culture which, at a certain time, provided an invaluable breath of fresh air for Catalan writers.

There are writers from the Balearic Islands and from Valencia, because the reality of the "Catalan Lands" is complex and embraces far more than just the Principality of Catalonia; from Joan Fuster to Llorenç Vilallonga, these regions have given us magnificent works of literature.

As you can see, I am mentioning names only to demonstrate the degree to which our literature is many-faceted; to those expecting to hear names in my speech, I would say that I have undoubtedly left out the best.

In the last fifteen years these influences have spread at a dizzying rate and have opened the doors to an even greater degree of diversity. There will be new generations writing from a Romanian, or a Moroccan, or a Russian reality that will merge with the Catalan reality. I hope that we will continue to do what we have done so far, to experience this plural reality as a treasure rather than an obstacle because we Catalans have always known a great deal about not pushing conflict to extremes. And, as far as writers are concerned, far from impoverishing our work, voluntary or enforced contact with other cultures has always broadened the horizons of our imaginations.

NOT ALL OF US THINK THAT LANGUAGE, MORE THAN ANYTHING ELSE, IS THE ELEMENT THAT UNITES US

That language is our tool is obvious. Of course it is the instrument that makes it possible for the writer's voice to be heard. But when I hear it being said that what unites a group of writers from the periphery is, above all, language, it has the same effect on me as hearing a trumpeter say that what unites trumpeters is, above all, their love of the trumpet, instead of their love of music. If I hear a trumpeter say that, I would think that he is quite correct as far as his use of the trumpet goes. But, as a musician, I would have my suspicions, to say the least.

I am a Catalan writer from Lleida (which really is on the periphery of Barcelona). But at any given moment I might identify more closely with a Canadian, or a Mexican, or a Galician writer than with a Catalan one. And I think that many of my Catalan colleagues could say much the same thing. I received my primary education in Castilian Spanish, as was the case for almost all children at the end of the Franco era; at the same time I got a taste of the French culture that was to open windows through which a breath of fresh air would enter the minds of so many of us; I discovered English literature while I was still young, and it left its mark on me. And it is this combination taken together with so many other discoveries, both fortunate and unfortunate, that makes me into the Catalan writer that I am.

I write in Catalan, and I do not need to justify the obvious importance of a language with almost a thousand years of history and more than eight million speakers. It is the language through which my parents introduced me to the world, and for them it was the only language they had. My father and his father before him suffered repression while defending it; my mother, who came from a small village, attended school in Catalan and once a year had to be examined in a language that she never heard spoken. And so, I write in Catalan because I love the language.

But my love is not unconditional. I do not believe in unconditional love, not even between couples. If conditions change, it is only logical that love should change. As a writer I love my language, always provided that what it conveys is brimming with ideas and interest. Over and above a love of the language comes a love of the word, which is where ideas come from, the only place on which all writers would probably agree. And, by putting too much emphasis on the language, one runs the risk that ideas will become scarce or rigid.

All of us who write in Catalan have renounced some of the privileges that apply when writing in a powerful language. But, perhaps, we have had others and so I believe that we should not be given anything that we do not deserve; literature is either universal or it is nothing, and universal is what our literature is and what it must go on aspiring to be.

However, we appear here with a label, which is quite logical; without labels there would be no market, there would be no fairs. But, as writers, we bear the responsibility of always having to look beyond national labels. Because it seems to me that we are heading for a world where the least concern will be whether we should classify books according to the language they are written in. We are heading for a world where we shall soon be classifying books by their height, by their weight, or even by their colour (some large stores already do so). More and more, and everywhere you look, we are destroying the contents and leaving just shells.

We live in a world that is in an enormous hurry and packets with labels on them make things much easier. But it is bad to label literature because every good book that we open is saying to us: "Things are more complicated than you think; cast aside easy, quick answers..."

And so, as a writer, I hope not to have contributed to the strengthening of any idea of labelling through this speech of mine. I hope not to have contributed to any kind of general clarification, because so often all that means is simplifying it down until it becomes a lie. Complex situations require complex ideas, and it is obvious that we do not live in a simple universe. Organisers, politicians, editors, journalists and academic programmers all want to classify us into different little packages because if not, it would be almost impossible for them to do their job these days. As writers, it is our duty to do everything possible to get out of the little packages and to unwrap them. There are some writers who have escaped altogether from being packaged and they will not be coming to the Fair. And there are some of us who are trying to make a hole through the packaging. So let everyone, both you and us, get on with their work or with what they have to do, with as much commitment as possible from the heart and from the head.

And I would just like to add a final brief comment on what it may mean today to do this job, the job of those of us who create packages as well as those of us who unwrap them.

This is a Fair that has always been inclined to dedicate itself to what I call the "book to be read". Because, as we know, there are books that, rather than for reading, are phenomena

intended to produce macro-events. But fortunately there are still many books that are meant to be read and thought about and thought about again, books that the reader can come away from feeling fascinated by the remarkable experience of having entered somebody else's mind. But everything makes one suspect that in future the content of books will gradually keep diminishing until we reach the moment when we have to fill them with some kind of a free gift, such as a key ring. The "book to be read" is a discreet sort of animal; it does not shout out even though it contains shrieks of pain, it does not thunder even though it is filled with rage, and it does not guffaw loudly even though it is full of humour. If no-one opens it, it will remain shut, in its corner, closed, unknown. It does not impose itself on the ear like music, or on the eye like a large painting. Its content is only revealed to the avid eyes of a reader who decides, at a certain moment, to make it laugh, cry, or shout. And even then, it only laughs, cries or shouts in the head of that one reader. Its appeal is not conspicuous. And herein lies much of its greatness, but also its danger of extinction. It is up to many of us here to be sensitive towards this delicate artefact if we want it to survive. And it is up to Catalan writers, whoever they are and whatever they are like, to create books that are boxes brimming with tools for the future.

As writers more or less accustomed to critical speeches, it may seem to us that all this business about fighting against labels is just a platitude; we are fed up of hearing it; and all the while I was preparing this speech I was thinking about the phrase used by the Swiss author Friedrich Dürrenmatt, the one that says: "What times these are, when we have to fight for what is self-evident!" Which just goes to prove that, for writers, it has always been a case of beating one's head against a brick wall, but eventually and with a bit of luck, one manages to see a chink of light.

Much is said about climatic disaster; personally, I find the threat of homogeneity of thought and the comfortable but sinister gregariousness of the human race these days to be more frightening than warming of the planet. If you share this overriding fear, then you will agree with me that, in a world like ours, narrative, philosophical reflection and poetry, today more than ever before, have a decisive role to play.