

## **ON WORLDS AND WORDS: LATIN AMERICAN THEN & NOW**

*Remarks at the Installation Ceremony for the William H. Gass Professor in Arts & Sciences*

Chancellor Mark Wrighton, Dean Edward Macías, Dr. William Gass and Mrs. Mary Gass, dear colleagues, students, family and friends...Today is a wonderful day. First of all, I would like to thank all of you for being here today, to share this special occasion with me. Your presence will help me express my gratitude for the incredible honor of this Chair which celebrates the excellence and refinement of one of the most prominent names of American contemporary literature, that of William H. Gass, author of some of the most intelligent and unforgettable books I have read in my many years of literary studies, one of the glories of the English language, a master of metaphors, an alchemist of words, images, and fantasies.

First of all, let me tell you that in my attempt to thank you for this honor I wish I had some of my daughter's gifts to assist me in this endeavor. I wish, for instance, I had Rosalía's grace and talent, her seductive ability to fascinate her public when she opened her exhibit at the Rockefeller Center, at Harvard University a few years ago, confessing to the audience: "I am painfully shy..." (something nobody would believe coming from me) only to initiate right there a deep and sound presentation on the topic of memory and oblivion, a topic that we have elaborated, one way or another, at least since the mid seventies, when Rosalia and I left Uruguay during the years of the dictatorship. I wish I had Juliana's unbelievable poise and charm right there on the stage of the Dorothy Chandler Auditorium, in Los Angeles, where she danced with an elegance that was solid and light, assertive and subtle at once, the way she always is, as a dancer, as a psychologist, as a mother. And I am mentioning them because none of the instances that have anteceded this exceptional day would have been possible without them, and no recognition would ever be just for me, but for the three of us.

Rosalía's installations have always elaborated on the ways in which remembrance combines fiction and history, repression and desire, presence and loss, creating a malleable mass of images that melt and drip and go away and return, making reflections like specters on the walls around us. It is possible that at least some of the recollections I have included in these notes share some of the same qualities, because they have to do with Latin America as a contradictory, tormented at times, but always fascinating object of desire, but also with Latin America as the arena of multiple struggles, for emancipation, dignity, and real independence, a space where memory is as important as historic imagination, fantasy as necessary as pragmatism, utopia as real as conflict and defeat.

I want to elaborate, very briefly, then, about a territory that is not foreign to the interpretive genius of William Gass, who has written some of the most keen and insightful pages on Latin American literature, particularly about a series of texts that he called in the article titled "A Fiesta for the Form" "the miracle of the risen word." I started to work on Latin American literature at the end of the seventies. Those were, in fact, the years in which the wonderful re-conquest of language and imagination initiated in the previous decade and represented in the so-called literature of the boom was

resonating loudly in an out of the region. As it is well known, the name boom made reference to the extraordinary blast of fictional texts that followed the political detonation of the Cuban Revolution. “It is boom as in booster, as in a deep exuberant uprush — explained William Gass in “The first seven pages of the Boom”—as in increase, growth, wild overflow —he explained- [...] but “it is only because we have not been paying proper attention that everything seems to be going off at once. And because we gesture grandly and cry out “boom!” we do not have to distinguish between the books that merely make noise and the books that really knock something down.” Gass is well aware of the Latin American tradition (Miguel Angel Asturias, Juan Carlos Onetti, Alejo Carpentier, Juan Rulfo) names that are closely associated with the narrative production of the following decades. He also refers to Pablo Neruda, Nicanor Parra, Gabriela Mistral, César Vallejo, Jorge Luis Borges. “Nevertheless —he adds— we must notice that poets, however popular and important, do not go boom.” His perceptive observations concentrate on what he calls the “massive, burning masterpieces” of Mario Vargas Llosa, Carlos Fuentes, Julio Cortázar, José Donoso, Guillermo Cabrera Infante, Gabriel García Márquez.

I agree with William Gass in that “Reading these texts is like going South.” Now, from St. Louis, it would be South by Midwest.

The narrative of the boom soon became a fashionable and exportable symbolic commodity that expanded like wildfire in international markets, changing the image of nations traditionally recognized only as producers of raw materials and political outbreaks. But the magic of literature faded to black in southern latitudes. Parallel to the brilliant production of the boom, in a very different register, the connections between world and word were changing for ever in the Southern Cone as a result of the military coups, which devastated civil societies and disarticulated national narratives in the region, giving strong testimony of Latin America’s contradictory or, at least, paradoxical quality.

While still in Uruguay, and motivated by the almost post-human nature of that period I wrote a book about Franz Kafka’s works, a narrative that in my country, during the military regime, seemed a realist portray of everyday life and prevailing customs. Later on, another book titled Memories of the Ghost Generation also focused on the agonies of culture under dictatorship, the strategies of ciphered literature, concealed meanings, recondite symbolisms naively intended to keep intellectuals in the Panopticon invisible to the penetrating gaze of power. “The only holy word is the free word” wrote William Gass on “The Shears of the Censor”. But under censorship nothing is sacred.

“Color—we read in *On Being Blue*— is consciousness itself, color is feeling.” I remember Uruguay in the seventies. Non-voluntary confessions were, at the time, the most popular and feared narrative genre and the world —fragmented and provisional as it was— acquired a kaleidoscopic emotional quality. “Words do not understand what is going on... Words do not know what they are saying” could be a poetic summary of those years. Green was not, anymore, the color of crickets but as a poet, who was a friend of mine, explained to me one day, the color of the army, and anybody could go to jail, or just be “disappeared” for using the word in vain even within the flimsy limits of a poem. Self-censorship was the enemy inside. As William Gass put it referring to Ernesto Sábato’s “Report on the Blind”, at times “it was difficult to differentiate the structure of

the state from the structure of the self.” A list of forbidden, “unpronounceable” words was published in the newspapers, more than 3 persons talking on a corner was considered subversion, public and private libraries were expurgated by the police on a regular basis, European-like avenues were the path for the continuous transit of military tanks, a book on cubism was an obvious reference to communist Cuba, anybody could be an informer, a traitor, a victim. Exile was a devastating experience for many; inxile was for others an unbearable punishment.

I discovered other sides of Latin America after I left my country and confronted the reality of a continent traversed by contradictions, dreams, projects, and failures, a large array of what Cuban writer José Martí called “our painful Latin American republics,” countries marked from the start by the violence of colonialism, which perpetuated until now its effects on the region.

I learned that in spite of the so-called emancipation, coloniality assumed other masks in modern times, and other names: imperialism, economic dependency, external debt, and more recently, neo-liberalism, globalization. Latin America was, then, at the end of the 70s and in the following decades —and still is— an urgent topic, and I concentrated my work on problems such as censorship, the discourses of power, the power of resistance, and later on, on the formation and de-configuration of national cultures: their emergence, their coming of age, their decay. I was particularly interested in the role of letrados, from the 17th-century on, in the configuration of collective identities and, after the independence, in the function of organic and revolutionary intellectuals in the construction of national narratives: their readings of the colonial past, their articulation to the ideology of progress, and their search for alternative ways to imagine the future.

We lived in Venezuela for a few years, my daughters and I, where I was lucky enough to become a researcher at the prestigious Centro Rómulo Gallegos. Juliana was born in Caracas and from there she got her joy, and her rhythm. After a while, at the beginning of the 1980s, we came to the US so I could work on my doctorate at the University of Minnesota. We moved, and moved, and moved. We changed languages, climates, we left behind family, friends, homes, and pets. My daughters used to ask me: “Mom, when do we finish the dissertation? When do they give us the Ph.D?” I guess this is a good occasion to let them know that we actually got it, but it was at a time when we were too busy trying to survive on an entry level salary, the three of us, so busy that we didn’t even notice. I was working extensively at the time on Spanish American baroque, and later on, on the neo-baroque: exploring literatures that tested, time after time, since the colonial period, the boundaries of the word, and analyzing the discursive strategies utilized by peripheral writers in the process of colonizing metropolitan languages.

These processes, deeply rooted in the conflicting and fascinating Latin American history, at the same time interrogate our social being and challenge our political imagination. In the region literature has always been tied, one way or another, to the exploration of Latin America’s multiple and changing identities, to the need to comprehend the violence of a colonial origin and its residues, to articulate local and universal knowledge, and to come to terms with the costs of sovereignty and modernization. Nevertheless, as William Gass

has argued, literature is not preaching but, rather, an aesthetic and epistemological adventure which provides neither answers, nor formulas, nor warranties. More like philosophy, literature is, for some, an intuitive interruption, for others, a rational interference in the course of the world; a toolbox we use to open up the space of everyday life, carving a hole into the walls so the outside is not alone anymore and our space in the world –in the word- is not a cell but a house, from where we can see fantasy flying like a 707 on the sky above us.

Today, the new approaches of cultural studies, the perspectives incorporated by postcolonial theory and, in general, the legacy of post-structuralism have suggested the need to diversify critical strategies in order to interrogate culture as a text —as a texture— where symbolic production, social movements, and ideological discourses interweave. Nevertheless, something in literature remains, still, a mystery: a word that suddenly touches the collective or the individual heart, the fleeting equilibrium of referents, images and meanings, the complicity of memory and fantasy in their attempt to conquer and prevail. That, and the challenge of planting the seed of critical inquiry in our students, triggering their desire to go further, through the looking glass, into unknown territories.

In closing I would like to confess that when I was very young I decided not to have a man's name attached to mine. Little I knew I would see the day in which I would welcome the occasion to do exactly that, thank to the generosity of this chair and the incredible kindness of my colleagues and of this institution. All of them have given me the opportunity to continue my work in a productive and challenging academic environment. But, above all, they have made possible for me to cross paths with the author of such memorable texts as The Tunnel, In the heart of the heart of the country, "The Pedersen Kid," "Order of Insects," Ommensetter's Luck, and so many others. A man who knows of the creative value of anger, who loves spiders because they are mindful beings, who knows that, in language you are dealing with geological objects that carry with them the weight of time and the traces of others. Please remain assured that I will do my best to honor this Chair, and to persevere in my work on Latin American cultures, not just of those that flourish and struggle in their original territories, but also of the ones that exist disseminated in this and other countries, beyond the limits of conventional boundaries.

Thank you.