



Literature for Children and Young Readers as Insurgent Poetry

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Spain/Galicia

Hello and welcome ladies and gentlemen. Thank you very much and we're grateful to you for having chosen Santiago and Galicia to create this habitat of cultural biodiversity, this germinal space of freedom, equality, fraternity and also of difference, difference to share and, like open bodies, to be accomplice to the exercise of that essential right for the human condition, namely the right to dream. Every human right is important, but if we had our right to dream amputated, we would lose all the rest.

The cells we use for dreaming are, fortunately, very extended all over the world. We cannot locate them in either of the hemispheres. There is neither a bureaucratic centre which directs dreams, nor a hierarchy which establishes them, nor a monetary fund which lends dreams with interest. The right to dream, just the way we understand it, as an insurgent energy, cannot be subordinate, cannot be secondary, it does not follow orders. And, as a counterpoint, neither does it try to dominate. That was one of the famous "four obligations of a journalist" formulated by Albert Camus. The other three guidelines were: to recognise totalitarianism and denounce it; not to lie, and to know how to admit what is not known; and to always refuse, and avoiding any pretext, every kind of despotism, even if it is provisional.

Our limits, those of the space created here, and also those of our insurgent occupation, would only be those: not to be subordinate and not to try to dominate.

Before we mentioned that on Earth, so conditioned by geopolitics and by the centres of economic power, it is impossible to find a place where dream nerve cells are assembled. But there is a very suggestive poetic image in the young Karl Marx and it is the idea that by spinning like the terrestrial sphere spins in space, in orbit around the sun, and apparently in suspension, we could image that the Earth constantly perches itself, leaning on a place in itself, like a classroom globe that moves from table to table. So I would not be surprised if the globe were to perch itself these days in Santiago de

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Compostela. After all, this city was born of a dream, and the *Campo de las Estrellas* (Field of Stars) is a good place to dream.

One of the expressions of the dream of the insurgent art in Galicia, and I'm talking about the year 1916, with the creation of the *Irmandades da Fala* (Brotherhood of the Language), was to conceive the space for Galician culture as "a cell of universality". So all of you, I don't know if you are aware of it, or if you have been told, are part of a dream that was woven by generations of free-thinking people. I know that the organizers have worked very hard. But this meeting had already been conceived a long time ago, since the 4th century at least. Miguel Torga, the great storyteller and poet who wrote "*Tras Os Montes*" (Behind the Scrubland), said that "whatever is local is universal without walls". So thank you for helping us. A lot of skill is necessary, a lot of humour, a lot of love, a lot of willingness, to build a venue without walls.

We were also talking about open bodies. In popular Galician culture, this terminology – open body – was often used for those people who had the ability to accommodate other voices. And to speak them. Cases have been recorded, and they have even appeared as news stories in the press at the beginning of the 20th century, with names and surnames, in which some people spoke with the voices of those who were absent, either having passed away or emigrated. For some, they were dealing with a gift. For others, with an annoyance. We can also think, from our point of view, that sometimes the gift is an annoyance and the annoyance, a gift. Victor Hugo claimed that during his séances he not only had been able to communicate with humans from other periods, but also with famous beings of other species, like Balaam's donkey, which apparently happened during his exile on the island of Jersey. I have a lot of respect for Victor Hugo, a great deal. We are talking about an extremely fruitful genius, all of him insurgent, but in my opinion the less well-known author of poems that even today are able to move me like no others, and with which he really proved himself to be an open body: the poet of *Les contemplations*. I respect Victor Hugo and I respect Balaam's donkey, that intelligent biblical animal that was brave enough to rebel against the brutality of its master. And here we have one of the first stories of insurgent literature, with two extraordinary moments. The moment when the donkey questions the one who mistreats him and, as a second dramatic event, the appearance of the biblical angel on a



special mission to defend the little donkey. As far as I'm concerned, communication between people and animals does not affect the principal of reality in the slightest, but it reinforces it. Among those texts that look down on the Galician language, I think that one, written by Julio Camba in the 20th century, is especially interesting, in which he basically says that Galician is only apt to communicate with animals. The writer was of Galician origin, a Galician speaker in his youth and he twisted the knife in the wound.

But with another type of humour, insurgent, we can turn this mocking pretentiousness around and discover a marvellous quality: that of a language which was able to overcome biological barriers and which allows us to communicate not only with humans, but also with other species, and who knows if with other cosmic latitudes. This quality places us at the ecological vanguard, and at the same time in post-Darwinism and at that prodigious time when animals could speak.

I am describing a Galician episode, but in reality I am talking about what I describe as insurgent literature, and as I see it, the vast majority of what today is known as literature for young people or children's and young readers' literature. One of the graffiti that has attracted my attention the most lately is one that I saw in *La Torre* Street in A Coruña and which is expressed as a question: Is there life before death? So, I think that the literature that we are talking about here is aimed at those who are alive before dying. And perhaps a little afterwards too. (Although it is a little early to talk about the *Santa Compañía* (Procession of the Dead)). Nowadays there is something very relevant and very fascinating in children's and young readers' literature. Namely that it assumes the condition of Open Body without complexes and without limits. It encompasses and embraces all the literary memory, be it insurgent, popular, oral, written, anonymous or not, with no inhibitions. It is being more innovative, because it is also the one that comes closest to that ideal formulated by Italo Calvino: "A novel in which everything speaks".

In his *Poetry as insurgent art*, Lawrence Ferlinghetti slowly strings together aphorisms that are also verses and sometimes micro-tales. He says: "Put your ear to the ground and listen to the hectic spinning of the Earth, the overloaded sea and the cries of pain of the dying animals". "Make unusual words common". And also: "Read between



the lives and write between the lines”. And also: “Be a teller of great tales, even the darkest ones”. And also: “Write on the tongue, not on the page”.

Listen to your breath...

Look at the eternity in the eyes of the animals.

And hence we dive head first into the idea of insurgent art that I am using here. Insurgent (from *insurgere* in Latin) means “he who rises, he who stands on his feet, he who is upright, who gets up and who raises himself”. There is another second meaning which is very interesting, associated with the sea: he who rows energetically, who rows unflaggingly. Insurgent writing is the fact that one is alert. Putting all the senses on full alert. Getting up is waking up. Like candles, one ignited word lights another which awakens a third. Words on their feet, with a renewed meaning. The story that sets off from the tongue, spurred on by desire. Wandering literature, which sets off towards the unknown, because something terrible can happen. And what is the most terrible thing that can happen? Abandonment. Or in other words. The impossibility of meeting. Of harmony.

There is a popular Galician song, a love song, which says:

What little God has given me
Fits into a closed hand.
With you a little is a lot
A lot without you is nothing.

This is the nature of the relationship between open bodies. And also of those who write and those who read with the book. Before opening, the book has the shape of a closed hand. When we open it, it opens up to us. It gets us up. It puts our sense on full alert. This is the clandestine happiness of open bodies. In the same way, *Clandestine Happiness* is the title chosen by Clarice Lispector for one of her most biographic stories. The one describing the day she opened the book, a book which had been denied to her, the book of desire, and she opened it like a body. Until then it had been a closed hand. Without her, that furtive book was nothing. With her, everything.

In *The Fleur de Lis*, another great Latin American writer, Marosa di Giorgio from Uruguay, tells us about another encounter in which the insurgent look is manifested: “When I was very young, my mum gave me the *Ángel de la Guarda*



(Guardian Angel). It is a religious picture card – she said. But I could see perfectly well that it was the real Angel. It was not a picture card, it was the Angel. An angel is like that, gentle, a colour, a painting, how heavy can it be”.

Tristan Tzara already warned us: “Hands up, and angel is going to fall!”. So an angel fell on Marosa di Giorgio.

Consciously, or unconsciously, like a frightful premonition or like reality, insurgent writing is that which rises up against abandonment, against loss.

One of the most emotional exchanges of letters in the history of literature is the correspondence between the poets Paul Celan and Nelly Sachs. Both of them had suffered the persecution of the Nazis in their youth. During the post-war period, one of them is in Paris, Paul, and he is already a well-known poet. And she lives in Stockholm, writes her poems, a terrifying and insurgent poetry, in which she speaks of the orphans of the world. But she has no one to read her work. One day she sends her poems to Paris, convinced that they had remained in the closed hand of destiny. But Paul Celan replies with enthusiasm, and Nelly Sachs writes: “Your letter was one of the greatest joys of my life. You are aware of my things, you have them with you; therefore I already have a home in the world”.

In one of his few discursive texts, on the occasion of the presentation of an award which vindicated him in Germany, Paul Celan writes: “Poems are also gifts; gifts for those who pay attention. Gifts that have a destiny”. And he also writes: “Only real hands write real poems. I cannot tell the difference between a hand shake and a poem”.

And here we have two open bodies which resist abandonment and make up a home which is a place without walls. And here we have once again the hand of the popular song:

With you a little is a lot
A lot without you is nothing.

Stories have such a great deal of insurgent power that they even transform the great theorizations regarding stories into stories. Hence the case of Vladimir Propp and his classic *Morphology of the Folktale*. In some way he can also be compared to Mikhail Bakhtin and his investigation *Popular Culture in the Middle Ages and the*



Renaissance (subtitle: *The Context of François Rabelais*), where the enquiries are of such luminosity, a feast for the senses and for the intelligence, that the reader is so implicated that we experience it like a re-existence. Propp entered the sanctuary of the traditional tale with so much subtlety that the tale decided not to abandon him as it usually does with its more vulnerable characters. The story saved the investigator Vladimir Propp, just like Tom Thumb. With his structuralist point of view he established a number of functions, which appeared in the internal machinery of all the stories, along with their nuances and variations. Separation, Prohibition, Transgression, Investigation, Trap, Complicity, Loss or lack... And so on, until reaching thirty one, which for Propp would be the hero's wedding. Many years later, in 1977, Gianni Rodari wrote *The Grammar of Fantasy* (*Grammatica della fantasia*). And he transformed those functions, that classification, into a game of cards. Rodari explains what he did with Propp and the two teachers seem to be the characters of a story. The morphology turned into a deck of cards. The functions were playing cards. And the possibilities of building stories were infinite. As a result a study with an academic conviction ended up becoming something like a small suitcase of *little devils*. A suitcase of small playful devils, that box of powers that witches compete for in order to make life difficult. While serious, adult literature, lends itself to a permanent cosmetic surgery, namely metaliterature, the insurgent literature of literature for children and young readers transforms the theoretical concepts into characters and plays card games on the altar of stiff, cloned and transgenic literature.

The mouth of literature is unpredictable. It can open in many ways and with many registers. Faced with the prejudices that it very often has to put up with, above all that of a supposed reductionism of reality, of an obliged withering, literature for young people has an ever increasing renewing and insurgent condition, both in its forms and scope.

There is another great stereotype, in my opinion mean and typical of lazy conformity, which is usually expressed with apodictic grandiloquence (all grandiloquence is apodictic and ... ridiculous), so, I am referring to that maxim "there is nothing new under the sun", "everything has been written", "everything has been invented", etcetera, etcetera. This statement seems inappropriate to me, poor in any



mouth, but it sounds like a pathetic betrayal if it comes from someone whose profession, whose occupation is that of writing. As a rule, I am suspicious of anyone who says “everything has been written”, above all if they are writers, because afterwards they usually become producers of great masterpieces, in so far as the thickness, that are tested by throwing them out of a window at a reader who just happens to be passing in the street to see if they leave their everlasting mark on the reader’s head, if they make much of a strong emotional impact on the passer-by. But seriously; there are some exceptions. Many people, author or readers, reluctant about labels, happily or without complaining accept the *best-seller* designation for their books. I don’t know which genre is a *best-seller*. I go to the shop or to the market for apples, I pay attention to the quality, to the origin, to the price, but I still have not found a type of apples that are called *best-seller*. In the field of literature, this denomination exerts a terrifying pressure, which is having a very corrosive effect and we could even say threatening. These days, which are controlled by the *burn-out* syndrome, by the heart attack of the soul, by covetous velocity, everything is pushed to compete, to win the race. And books too. Books, and cultural creations in general, also suffer this paranoid climate all too often. They are turned into slaves. They are like exploited children. They themselves are the protagonists of the stories they tell. They suffer fear, tests, loneliness, abandonment. Recently a homeless friend of mine passed away, a former sailor. He used to sleep in the colonnade of a nearby square, in the city where I live, and we used to talk every morning, whenever I bought some newspapers. We would talk about everything. Guillerme, that was his name, knew much more about the world than I do. He did not put a price tag on his time. For him, coins had the same meaning as what in some places of Galicia, such as Petín, they call the *Memoria* (Memory). The *Memoria* was a wine that used to be given to newborns, a home-made wine in which they used to drop a copper coin beforehand. For Guillerme this was the value of coins. They made gulps of memory possible. He, who had been a Sinbad, used to give me advice. He would tell me stories that I had to turn into novels or tales. Until one day he surprised me with a question that sounded like an accusation: Why don’t you write *best-sellers*?

At school we were always taught that the unique feature of the human being was the rational animal, with the ability to express itself by means of language. This was the



only thing that categorised us as superior beings. But later on in life, we began to understand, as Walter Benjamin explained all too well, that many times on the back of a document of civilisation there was an act of savagery. Or as the old journalist Magnus would say, in *Sidetracked*, by Henning Mankell, “There are two types of writers: one who digs in the ground in search of the truth. He is down below, in the hole, shovelling earth upwards. But above him there is another man, throwing soil down. He is also a journalist (we can add, a writer)”. What we discover in time is that it is neither the rational condition, nor the use of language what defines the human condition, but rather the insurgent ability to fight against abandonment, to rebel against injustice, like *The Wild Child*, in the film by François Truffaut. He was trained to speak, to associate words and concepts, he finally behaved like a socialised young man, but he had one defect. There was something missing in him. He did not cry. And this emerged when the teacher would punish him for something he did not do, for something unfair. And then the insurgent being manifested itself. That which really defines the human condition: rebellion against injustice. Not allowing oneself to be dominated. A friar from the Andine missions, during the Conquest, justified punishing some of the natives by marking them and cutting off one of their ears because “they were not docile to the empire of their language”.

They want us in a zoo. And it is necessary to write stories that are free animals. Writing is always a type of commitment. As the Portuguese writer Miguel Torga says, a writer’s first commitment is to write, but writing always commits. There are people who do not like this idea, but it is enough to take a quick look at universal literature to realise that it endures, that it continues to question us as time passes, that it tells us something new each time we read it, this is insurgent literature. In other words, it rises, it is upright and stands on its feet. And it always goes further. There is a magnificent tale by a Galician author, Rafael Dieste, which reflects the sense of the path of the insurgent impetus, in search of the unknown. It is the story called *El viejo que quería ver el tren* (The Old Man Who Wanted to See the Train).

“They were from beyond the mountain”, says Dieste, “from one of those villages with a fierce and wild name which lies hidden between silent peaks”. In one of the houses of this village, there is a bedridden old man who is very ill. As he says farewell



to life he mumbles a wish. He wants to see the train. How insane! His daughter and son-in-law start laughing. But the boy of the house comes to his rescue. He does have a sense of reality. He also wants to see the train, like his grandfather. And that was how one day they filled the cart with a load of hay to seat the old man and they set off along the path. It was almost a fleeting glance, at an unstaffed station. The narrator says: “The train was already coming, a line of well-trained monsters, with an arrogant iron captain at the fore!” The train stopped for an instant. “And fled once again, full of indifference, like it would never again remember the poor crumbling station”.

When they return home, the boy does not stop. He is ecstatic. He talks and talks about the train. About the speed. About the faces he saw in the windows of the carriages. About a girl wearing a hat. But the old man does not say much. He is sad. “There were other worlds besides his own”, Dieste writes. “When I grow up I will also travel by train”, the boy shouts. “And the old man’s wrinkles wove a sullen sadness”.

Both of them, the old man and the boy, shared the same dream. After seeing the train, they wanted to travel by train. To know that there was something beyond the railway.

To go beyond, to go Beyond. This was the title of one of the most important manifestos of Galician culture, which was written by two of Dieste’s colleagues, Alvaro Cebreiro and Manoel Antonio. This Manoel was a sailor, author of one of the most beautiful poetry books in the Galician language, *De catro a catro* (From Four to Four), written during his time at sea on a packet-boat and published in 1928, which includes a poem called *Intenciones* (Intentions), very appropriate for any human’s travels, our travels:

They filled our sails
With the shipwrecked light of daybreak (...)
We chain together foam goodbyes
For all of the lost beaches
We will put together blank notebooks
Of the wandering novel of time
We will fish in the net
Of Sinbad’s traced atlases

As you know, everything in *One Thousand and One Nights*, including the voice of Sherezade, is a march against abandonment.



This is where we can find a description of the possible insurgent navigation. In my opinion, the march of children's and young readers' literature also has one of its best heroes in the march of Charles Chaplin's tramp, Charlie. Silent movies, the great silent movies, shares fundamental features with literature. The walk of Chaplin's tramp is the march towards the unknown and freedom. A simultaneous march. When one foot steps on coincidence, the other steps on causality. With one foot on hope and the other on restlessness. At night and in the day. But above all, a foot steps on loss and the other on affection. It is a march against abandonment.

In the Talmud it is written that God invented the human being to hear him tell stories. There are also those who claim that God invented the human being because he needed someone to remember, given that God is eternal, immeasurable, and He does not distinguish between yesterday and today, up and down, these small things. The imagination would be something like the foam of the memory. So here we have literature. All books transmit knowledge. But there are readings that transcend matter. There are works that transmit from generation to generation what we could call the DNA of humanism, basic information about the human condition. We read *The Odyssey* by Homer or *El Quijote* by Cervantes and not only do we have an aesthetic enjoyment and pleasure, but we also receive a type of essential information regarding the mystery of the human which is not available from anywhere else. We read the works of Rosalía de Castro and it is incredible how deeply we can delve into the secret area of the human being with a few poems and also get to know the untold history of a nation. Here we have emigration, discrimination against women, disregard for the language of the poor... But there is also popular culture, the strength of desire, the festiveness, the song, that alternative energy that kept a nation alive in the face of adversity:

I will sing about you, Galicia,
In the Galician tongue,
Solace for ills,
Relief from misery.
(...)
By night, by day,
At dawn, in the evening,
You will hear me singing
Over hills and lowlands.



With these poems, with these few festive or injured words, great voids were filled that the official stories never told. They filled the abandonment...

The house resisted thanks to insurgent literature. And we could quote Henri Bosco. “The house fought bravely... The house held on to me tightly like a she-wolf, and at times I felt her aroma descend maternally to my heart. That night she was truly my mother. I only had her to keep me safe and hold me. We were alone”.

No wonder Propp placed the function of separation or abandonment at the forefront of his morphology of the folktale.

Abandonment, separation, appears in almost all the stories as a main element of what we call the plot. It is without a doubt the greatest human fear and I think of all beings. We can all recall classic examples, which make children’s stories doubtlessly the hardest literature ever written, where it is common for parents to appear as the worst enemies of their children. It is a limit where the so-called literature for adults rarely reaches. Objectively, they are stories that should be part of the crime genre, next to Daniel Hammett, Jim Thompson or Georges Simenon. The most quoted examples are those in which the characters are boys and girls, such as Hansel and Gretel or Cinderella or Snow White. But the disease that is abandonment seems to threaten everything. Let us think about the Bremen Town musicians. Why do the donkey, the dog, the cat and the rooster unite? Because all of them begin to see the danger of dying at the hands of their owners, of those who they served efficiently and tamely. Their adventure is in reality an escape and, being so different, they join forces to save themselves. I will never forget the day I read *The White Snake*, in which a pair of adult crows throws out their young from the nest, with a terrifying shout: “Get out of here, jailbird!” It is difficult to think of a more brutal expression to call one’s child: “Jailbird!” And I was especially hurt because I am very fond of crows.

What’s more. If I had to choose another image to describe not only the march of our literature but also the flight of our wandering literature, it would be the flight of the crow. When we write we fly just like a crow.

I remember when we were small, when we were told the story of the Great Flood in the Old Testament, and about Noah’s ark, we always paid a lot of attention to the special participation and presence of the animals. At that time, I had only seen one



ship with animals. It was a merchant ship that arrived to the port of A Coruña with stud bulls from Canada. I saw how they were unloaded very carefully, wrapped in a leather cover and using a crane. Apparently they had paid a fortune for them. The recollection seems to be a little confused, because what I did not forget was that one of the studs, which was called Rocky, was going to have one hundred thousand descendents in four years. What I do remember is that one of the many spectators of the unloading manoeuvre in the port shouted out with a certain chauvinist resentment, accompanied by a somewhat acrobatic posture: “What’s this then? Aren’t there any bulls in Spain or what?” Well, *mutatis mutandis*, we were in Church listening to the punishment of the Great Flood and imagining all those unique pairs, each one with their own menu, travelling on Noah’s magnificent transatlantic liner. And finally, the leading role was for the dove and the crow. When the clouds began to clear and the waters began to subside, Noah set both of them free, their mission to explore and bring back a detailed report about the progress of the climate change. Well. As we all know, the dove returned in time, and fulfilled its undertaking perfectly, bringing back an olive branch in its beak.

In other words, the dove already had a sense of iconography and also of staging. On the other hand, we knew nothing about the crow. It is not just that we did not know anything. Neither did Noah, nor the priest in church, nor the teacher at school. The crow disappeared. As we say about artists who do not reappear, the crow exited stage left. We never heard about it again. So at that time, at the end of Mass, I would observe to see if I could see the crow. And all the crows I would see seemed to me to be Noah’s crow. A crow’s facial expression is typical of someone who has a secret. In my opinion, out of all the historical phrases that have been said in Galicia, the most suggestive is the one attributed to Dictinus, who was a follower of Priscillian’s heterodoxy and also wrote *Libra*, a 6th century example of ‘children’s’ literature, and he must have been quite insurgent because he decided to burn his work before they burnt him. Well, Dictinus’ phrase was: “Swear, perjure yourself, but never tell your secret”.

When I wrote the novel, *En Salvaje Compañía* (In Wild Company), in which everything spoke, even the animals, the critics out there spoke of magical realism. I don’t know why. It is the most realistic novel I have ever written. Thankfully one of the analysts, in Germany, realized something and instead of talking about magical realism,



said that it was “magical punkism”. It’s better than nothing. And it is true that crows, at least those from Xallas, those from the Death Coast, are rather like punks.

Bruno Bettelheim has written unforgettable lines about what the anguish of separation is. The Chilean poet Vicente Huidobro says in a funny poem: “The four cardinal points are three: North and South”. Indeed, our four emotional points are three: affection and loss. I believe that they are the two decisive poles along the path of humanity.

All the struggles that in some way propose an improvement in the human condition are struggles against abandonment, indifference and loss. Abduction. That personal, individual fear, abandonment and separation, can also be transferred to society, and especially to how we usually deal with children. Either consciously or unconsciously, there are many forces that push us towards abandonment and separation. The most extreme and repulsive ways are those of separation because of race or social origin. But we also see how differences are established from the moment of birth in environments which claim to be more civilised. We live in the same home, which is Mother Earth, but separated by fences, walls, trenches, barbed wire... Sometimes, physical; others, invisible, but still real. The fact is that there is a stupid conspiracy to separate human beings since childhood. We see how there are euphemisms that are insulting to the intelligence, for example when “academic freedom” is called upon to establish ghettos at school age. Prejudices and beliefs are imposed and even institutionalised in order to separate, divide and infect children with the demons that roam around in the heads of adults. For example, here in Galicia, we are experiencing the painful historic circumstance of suffering pressure from powerful sectors that are trying to take from children, or at least from some of them, the knowledge of their own language, the Galician language. If this were a story, we would be talking about the treasure. And I say this, at this international forum, because a language does not only belong to those who speak it, but it is also an asset of humanity, just like the forests and the rivers and the birds in the sky are not an enclosed property that one can get rid of on a whim.

In his unforgettable text, namely *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, Bruno Bettelheim recalls a tale of Turkish origin which tells



the story of a small hero, Iskender, who is thrown to the bottom of the sea in an iron box by his own parents. But a green bird appears and sets him free. And although the rescue is important, perhaps it is more important that the boy Iskender regains his confidence and dreams once again, thanks to the words of the green bird, possibly the most insurgent phrases of all time:

“Now you know that you will not be abandoned”.

That green bird, thanks to you, is here today in Compostela.



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